
A SHORT LIFE OF JOHN CALVIN

CALVIN'S EARLY YEARS (1509-1536)

Ronald Vandermey¹

If I had to choose a historical figure apart from our Savior whose life and work radically changed my own destiny, John Calvin would without question be that man. Because of Calvin's scholarly and reasoned approach to theology, my Huguenot ancestors risked and later ran for their lives fleeing France to settle in the Netherlands where they could practice the Reformed faith. Hence, thanks to the blessed providence of our Savior, my name, my cultural heritage, and my theological perspective were impacted by the one whose 500th birthday falls in this year of our Lord, 2009.

Born "Jean Cauvin" in Noyon, France, on July 10, 1509, to Jeanne le Franc and Gerard Cauvin, this child prodigy changed his name when a young teenager in college to the Latin form *Ioannis Calvinus*, which in French then became Jean Calvin (hence the English "John Calvin"). Gerard, known for wisdom and prudence, had served in various ecclesiastical offices in Noyon, and wanted his son John to enter the priesthood. Paying for his son's education with the noble family of Hangest de Montmor, Gerard proudly witnessed young John displaying a genius in every subject attempted. At the age of twelve, the boy was awarded a chaplaincy at the cathedral in Noyon, but a plague in that city forced young Calvin and the other students at Hangest

to seek refuge sixty miles southwest in Paris. Moving in with an uncle in the bustling capital of France, Calvin began his college studies in 1523 (at age fourteen) at the College de la Marche. Soon he transferred to a more ecclesiastical and prestigious school, the College de Montaigu, where his college expenses were paid by some local parishes. Calvin credited an instructor of Spanish heritage at this school for his sound foundation in dialectics and scholastic philosophy. Calvin's mental acumen brought him acclaim in philosophy and debate, and even produced several preaching opportunities for the teenaged genius.

Although the teachings of Luther and rising French reformers such as Jacques Lefevre d'Etapes spread like wildfire throughout Paris, Calvin was initially shielded from these new doctrines while at college. Friendships outside of the school in 1527 awakened young Calvin to the errors in the Roman Church, and Calvin started to change his mind about becoming a priest. His father, who had held numerous high positions in the church, had a falling out with the authorities in Noyon at this same time, and thus ordered his son to change his studies to law. Attending a famous law school in Orleans and then in Bourges, the now budding barrister came under the influence of Melchior Wolmer, a humanist favorable to the Reformation. His law studies, however, abruptly ended when Calvin's father died (May 26, 1531), and

he returned to Paris to study Hebrew and the classics.

At age twenty-two Calvin published out of his own pocket his first book, a commentary on the text of Seneca's *De Clementia*. Increasing numbers of friendships with humanists and French Reformers caused him to seriously question the Church's authority, and to prompt his adoption of the Reformed view. The exact moment of conversion, long a subject of debate and mystery, occurred some time during 1533. Calvin speaks of this part of his life in his intensely personal introduction to his commentary on the Psalms. In the Psalms, Calvin identified personally with David's struggles in life, and thought it fitting to include his biography in the introduction. Although the language is archaic, let me quote the cogent section of this introduction dealing with his conversion:

At first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one of my early period of life.²

One credited with exercising influence on Calvin after his conversion was Nicolas Cop, who in November, 1533, began his tenure as the rector of the University of Paris. Cop's inaugural address, entitled "Christian Philosophy," emphasized the necessity of a certainty of salvation, a feature which would be essential to Calvin's new belief system. Calvin had a part in the writing of that address, which infuriated the Sorbonne theolo-

gians who were labeled in the speech as "sophists." With government officials notified, Cop and Calvin both saw the possibility of joining other reform minded souls in prison, and fled Paris. For the next three years, Calvin lived in various places inside and outside of France, often under assumed names. During part of this time, he studied in the excellent library of Louis du Tillet, and began writing *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

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Decisive for Calvin was his move to Basel, where Calvin could see the Reformation in full swing, thanks to the work of John Oecolampadius, who had abolished the mass from worship, and participated in having a union between the civil and ecclesiastical governments. Oecolampadius had died prior to Calvin's arrival, but the other Reformers welcomed him, and it was there that he studied Hebrew. He continued to write *The Institutes*, which he published in March, 1536. Calvin, in his travels in Switzerland, briefly in France, and in the Holy Roman Empire, found that Protestants were falsely defamed everywhere and, most troubling, that persecution of Protestants in France was increasing under King Francis I. Calvin's humility and the purpose for writing are again to be found in his own words penned to the Introduction to the Psalms:

My objects were, first, to prove that these reports were false and calumnious, and thus to vindicate my brethren, whose death was precious in the sight of the Lord; and next, that as the same cruelties might very soon after be exercised against many unhappy individuals, foreign nations might be touched with at least some compassion towards them and solicitude about them. When it was then published, it was not that copious and labored work which it now is, but only a small treatise containing a summary of the principal truths of the Christian religion, and it was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed by those flagitious and perfidious flatterers. That my object was not to acquire fame, appeared from this, that immediately after I left Basle, and particularly from the fact that nobody there knew that I was the author.³

Calvin was indeed the author, and *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he addressed to King Francis I, became the most influential book of the Reformation period. His point in writing was to show that the Christianity that he set forth was the true historic faith, and that the changes had in actuality been presumptuously and erroneously made by the Roman Catholic Church. Codifying the essence of the Christian faith (improved through four editions that saw their final form in 1559), Calvin set forth the entire drama of creation, sin, and redemption as God drew them upon the canvas of Scripture. Stressed throughout *The Institutes* are the themes of God's sovereignty and the necessity of man's submission to God's will. In its final form, Calvin orga-

nized *The Institutes* according to the Apostles' Creed, and it is that edition that endures today as the crowning achievement of the great Reformer's life.

Leaving Basel, Calvin wanted to quietly pursue his studies in Strasbourg. However, the Lord's providence would change those plans. A war between the Holy Roman Empire and France had closed the most direct route to Strasbourg, and Calvin decided to spend one night in Geneva in July, 1536. Calvin himself described what happened "as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me." The one who would strain every nerve to detain Calvin in Geneva was William Farel. In 1535 Farel had successfully suppressed the mass in Geneva, and had even expelled the monks and nuns out of the city. Farel was quite aware of his own shortcomings in theology and organization, and believed with all his heart that God's providence had bottled the solutions to all his problems in the brain of the reluctant young scholar whose reputation had literally preceded him. Ignoring Calvin's natural bashfulness and timidity, Farel threatened him that if he did not stay and lead the Reformation in Geneva, God would curse his time of study in Strasbourg. Calvin stayed, and the rest, as we might say, "is history." 📖

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² Rev. James Anderson's translation from the original Latin, which he published in 1849; quoted in *Parallel Classic Commentary on the Psalms* [AMG Publishers, 2005], p. x.

³ *Ibid.*

CALVIN'S MIDDLE YEARS (1536-1541)

Laurie A. P. Copeland*

EARLY GENEVAN MINISTRY

After the fiery French evangelist Guillaume Farel implored John Calvin to stay in Geneva, Calvin agreed to surrender his pursuit of a life as a contented scholar and remain to assist Farel to reform the city in accordance to the will of God. Sixteenth century Geneva was a middle class city with a small number of wealthy merchants. Surrounding Geneva were cliffs near the sea, forming walls of protection from enemy attacks. A city of refuge for many French and Italian believers, Geneva later became the city of the esteemed Swiss watch, through the ideals of John Calvin (at the time he outlawed jewelry, resulting in increased watch sales and improved technology). Although relying on the support of Berne, a Swiss Protestant city, French-speaking Geneva was an independent city-state near the borders of France, Switzerland, and Italy. Governing Geneva were several city councils (magistrates). British author T. L. Parker notes that on May 26, 1536, "Geneva had become by constitution an evangelical city."¹ Consequently, Geneva's City Council banned the Roman Catholic mass and swept its churches of relics, including the sparkle and glitter.

Accordingly, Calvin at twenty-seven began his work in September 1536 with the position of "Professor of Sacred Letters."² Parker states, "This may mean he preached without performing any other parochial duties or that he gave expository lectures on the Bible."³ Not yet ordained into the ministry, Calvin received

high praise for his inspiring sermons while preaching the Pauline Epistles.⁴ Elected pastor in November 1537, Calvin was working full time in the Genevan church Saint Pierre, a former Gothic-Roman Catholic Church divested of its icons, while retaining the stained glass windows.

Although serving as a pastor, the complete details on Calvin's ordination ceremony are somewhat sketchy. Biographer John T. McNeill says, "the widely held opinion that he was never ordained to the ministry seems to rest upon the absence of evidence bearing on the point amid the scant records of his early weeks in Geneva."⁵ However, "Calvin himself strongly urged ordination, with the imposition of hands, at a synod held in Zurich, in 1538, and in various writings he stresses the importance of the rite."⁶ In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* he mentions that ordinations should take place "at stated times of the year in order that no one might creep in secretly without the consent of the believers, or be too readily promoted without witnesses."⁷ Further, he says, "I accepted the charge having the authority of a lawful vocation."⁸ Calvin's ordination seems certain.

At this time Farel, twenty years Calvin's senior, was serving as a senior pastor in another church. Historian Philip Schaff tells us, "But with rare humility and simplicity he yielded very soon to the superior genius of his young friend."⁹ Laboring for the glory of God, Calvin and Farel endeavored to reform Geneva and make it the benchmark for a Christian society. Calvin wrote three documents while in Geneva, the *Confession of Faith of 1536*, *Articles on the Organization of the*

Church and its Worship at Geneva, and a *Catechism of the Church at Geneva*.¹⁰ Schaff describes Calvin's *Confession* as consisting of "Twenty-one articles in which the chief doctrines of the evangelical faith are briefly and clearly stated for the comprehension of the people. It begins with the Word of God, as the rule of faith and practice, and ends with the duty to the civil magistracy."¹¹ Theologian James T. Dennison reveals some concerns surrounding the authorship of Calvin's *Confession* saying, "The authorship of the confession is still disputed—some favoring Calvin, others Farel, others arguing for co-authorship."¹²

Meanwhile, the City Council enacted the *Confession*, the *Articles on the Organization of the Church*, and *Catechism*, into law on January 16, 1537; but the acceptance of the *Articles* created dissent, especially among the Anabaptists (who denied infant baptism), with whom Calvin had strongly disagreed. The *Articles* described the church's rights to exercise ecclesiastical discipline independent of the City Council. Theologian Joel Beeke explains that, "People particularly objected to the church's use of excommunication to enforce church discipline."¹³ Sovereign authority meant the church had the power to determine who was worthy to take the Lord's Supper, and to excommunicate immoral persons. Calvin believed church discipline was necessary for the purity of the church, but that power was God-given to the church and not rather to civil authorities (cf. Matt 18:15-19). "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tim 2:19). Consequently, Calvin and Farel implemented aggressive reform of the church, which resulted in persecution, especially from the Libertines, who largely were free think-

ers. Theologian Henry B. Smith recounts how "he was feared and opposed by the Libertines of his day, as he is in our own."¹⁴ Forced to swear to the teachings of the *Confession*, citizens who resisted could not retain their citizenship, but would face banishment. McNeill says, "A good many remained in opposition, and even when the councils gave them the alternative of banishment, their resistance continued."¹⁵

And so, desiring to prohibit unrepentant persons (those who failed to comply with the confession) from taking the Lord's Supper, Calvin argued that the pastors should have the power to prohibit the unworthy and excommunicate the impenitent.¹⁶ In January 1538 Geneva ruled that every citizen had the right to take the Lord's Supper and that no minister had permission to exclude anyone.¹⁷ Denying the Reformers their rights to exercise independent control over ecclesiastical discipline caused a tumult to erupt from within the council.

Moreover, in March 1538 Geneva adopted the Swiss city Berne's liturgy without the consultation of Calvin or Farel and violated the prior agreement described in the *Articles*, which had given Geneva's ecclesiastical power to the church. Outraged at the new proposal, Calvin and Farel refused to honor the new Genevan ordinances or celebrate the Lord's Supper on Easter because of the widespread immorality. Dennison describes how the two Reformers responded saying:

Hence when Calvin and Farel refused to administer the Lord's Supper at Easter 1538, the resulting public protests drove the two from Geneva. They were permitted three

days to clear out of town. By the spring of 1538, the Geneva Confession was a dead letter.¹⁸

After the resulting commotion between the Reformers and the council, they were banished from the city.

LIFE IN STRASBOURG

As exiles, Calvin and Farel departed from Geneva, going first to Berne and Zurich and then to Basel. According to Schaff, "In Basel they were warmly received by sympathizing friends."¹⁹ Staying for two months, Farel accepted a call to a church in Neuchatel (Switzerland), where he stayed for the remainder of his life.²⁰ In September 1538 Calvin traveled to German-speaking Strasbourg, a free imperial city, where, at the invitation of Martin Bucer, a former Dominican monk and Strasbourg Reformer, he served as pastor of a church with about four or five hundred French refugees. Bucer, a pioneer in the development of a Protestant liturgy, already had largely organized a city-state church, which was helpful to Calvin in his later ministry in Geneva (1541).

At this time Strasbourg was the international capital for the Reformation community, "known as the Antioch of the Reformation," and most of the French refugees went there from France to escape persecution.²¹ Pastoring what Calvin called the "little French Church," was a joyful time in Calvin's life.²² Describing his pastoral diligence, Schaff says, "He conscientiously attended to pastoral care, and took a kindly interest in every member of his flock. In this way, he built up in a short time a prosperous church, which commanded the respect and admiration of the community of Strassburg."²³ "He preached four times a week (twice

on Sunday), and held Bible classes."²⁴ Calvin also published a Psalter and the Apostle's Creed.²⁵

In addition, Calvin rewrote and enlarged his second Latin edition of the *Institutes*, from six chapters to seventeen, paying more attention to his theology, while maintaining the same theological doctrines that were consistent throughout his life. Author Ford Lewis Battles notes that, "A large increment of Augustinian material enters the 1539 edition for the first time."²⁶ Augustine's influence on Calvin's theology was large. Calvin rendered a French version for French believers with the purpose that Calvin describes: "...to aid those who desire to be instructed in the doctrine of salvation."²⁷ Theologian B. B. Warfield says, "The first French edition of the 'Institutes,' then, that of 1541, is a careful translation by Calvin himself (as the title-page and Preface alike inform us) of the second Latin edition of 1539."²⁸ Translating the *Institutes* from Latin into French helped advance the French language.

Moreover, in 1540 Calvin published a commentary on the book of Romans, the first of his twenty-two volumes of Bible commentaries, which included theological subjects on sin, justification, sanctification, and predestination. Calvin said, "For when anyone understands this Epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole Scripture."²⁹ Hence, the Epistle to the *Romans* is a crucial book to the discovery and knowledge of God. The German Protestant August Tholuck describes Calvin's Romans commentary: "In his [Calvin's] Exposition on the Epistle to the Romans are united pure Latinity, a solid method of unfolding and interpreting, founded on

the principles of grammatical science and historical knowledge, a deeply penetrating faculty of mind, and vital piety.³⁰

His first commentary is only the beginning of some of the most exquisite writings in church history.

While pastoring and publishing various works, Calvin met Idelette de Bure, the widow of a former Anabaptist who converted to the Reformed faith. Idelette had been attending the “little church” with her husband and their two little children before Idelette’s husband died from an illness. In August 1540 Calvin and Idelette married and enjoyed a happy marriage.

Meanwhile, trying to unite the divisions occurring between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestants, Calvin attended several conferences in Frankfurt, Worms, and Regensburg and met the German scholar Philip Melancthon, with whom he developed a close relationship. Melancthon, an associate of Martin Luther and a learned man, wrote the presentation and apology for the *Augsburg Confession*. Throughout Calvin’s life he corresponded with Melancthon through numerous letters, and their friendship continued.

Previously, Bucer laid the groundwork for the Protestant community with his liturgical work; his influence was helpful to Calvin in the development of his own liturgy. Combining his ideals with those of Bucer, Calvin rendered a French liturgy that would be useful in his final Genevan ministry; it later became known as the *Genevan Liturgy*. Calvin closely observed the work of other men and learned from them. Schaff states, “Calvin built his form of worship on the foundation of

Zwingli and Farel, and the services already in use in the Swiss Reformed Churches.”³¹ In the worship of God Calvin believed in maintaining theological and biblical integrity.³² Calvin’s liturgy consisted of Scripture, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42 NKJV). Theologian John Leith notes, “Calvin gave serious attention to the theme.”³³ He believed that the Bible alone was “to be the rule of faith and life,” and not adding to the Word of God, will worship, except what Scripture commanded (cf. Rev 22:18-19).³⁴ Calvin regarded preaching (in the vulgar tongue of the people) central to the worship.³⁵ “Nothing which does not lead to edification ought to be received into the Church.”³⁶ Calvin asserts, “In preaching, language must be used to communicate thought, not to impress the hearers with the speaker’s learning.”³⁷ Every element of worship should be with the objective of edification.³⁸ Calvin was always in pursuit of God’s honor. Accordingly, outward display had no importance, as Leith reveals, “Feeling, emotion, aesthetics and beauty were all subordinate to theological soundness.”³⁹ Moreover, Schaff explains, “He had no sympathy whatever with Roman Catholic ceremonialism which was overloaded with unscriptural traditions and superstitions.”⁴⁰ Orthodoxy superseded outward display.

In 1539 the esteemed Italian scholar, Roman Catholic Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto, Archbishop of Carpentras, accused the Genevan Protestants of jeopardizing the unity of the church. Schaff describes Sadoletto as “leaning towards a moderate semi-evangelical reform from within the Catholic Church.”⁴¹ Parker tells


us that Sadoleto “addressed a letter to the council calling Geneva back to the faith of its fathers.”⁴² Writing an exposition of the Catholic doctrines to Geneva, Sadoleto provided an eloquent argument for the Catholic faith, but failed to mention the Scriptures.⁴³ This event brewed zeal in Calvin, as Schaff explains, “But Calvin, having read it at Strasbourg, forgot all his injuries, and forthwith answered it with so much truth and eloquence, that Sadolet immediately gave up the whole affair as desperate.”⁴⁴ Calvin reasoned from the Scriptures with wisdom: “Our cause, as it is supported by the truth of God, will be no loss for a complete defense.”⁴⁵ With great persuasion, Calvin defended the Reformed doctrines. Seen as a type of savior, Calvin rescued Geneva from its former entanglement and yoke of Roman Catholicism. This event highlights an “important and interesting controversy which occurred in the Germany period of Calvin’s life, and left a permanent impression on history.”⁴⁶ Parker declares, “This is one of that brilliant set of writings which emerged from his stay in Strasbourg and which, purely as literature, he never surpassed.”⁴⁷

RETURN TRIP TO GENEVA

In the meantime the city of Geneva was much different from the time of Calvin’s banishment. Subsequent to Calvin and Farel’s displacement, the city plummeted to near destruction.⁴⁸ The problems consisted of “internal disturbances,” and it was during this time that the former exile would return, rebuild, and revive the nearly desolate city.⁴⁹ Calvin’s writings to Sadoleto caught the attention of the Genevan officials, and many of his former opponents now wanted him back. British author Diarmaid MacCulloch describes Calvin’s situation:

He did not forget his Strassburg experiences when in 1541 he had the remarkable satisfaction of finding himself invited back to Geneva by a chastened set of city governors. The religious chaos had dispersed, and the only remedy they could see was to reemploy their austere former guest.⁵⁰

Albeit, because of the former opposition he experienced during his earlier Genevan ministry, this was not an easy move for Calvin. Nevertheless, Calvin left Strasbourg and returned to Geneva. It turned out that his experience in Strasbourg was the preparation for such a time as this.

Although the Genevan officials sent Calvin and Farel away as disgraced exiles, indigent and unemployed, God purposed to use it for the good. We are “persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4:9). Calvin’s exile was an exceedingly bitter time for him; he left Geneva as an outcast, but returned as a savior. In addition, it turned out that Calvin’s Strasbourg ministry was the most enjoyable time of his life. He entered into a blessed marriage with a woman he cherished. He enjoyed a prosperous ministry to the dear people of God at his “little French church,” and he wrote some of the most brilliant theological writings in church history. We can never fully understand God’s providential workings, but, “we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). 

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¹ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 79.

² John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 136.

³ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 80.

⁴ Guilielmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss, Editors, *Opera Calvini (Corpus Reformatorum)* 10b, 91, quoted in T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 80.

⁵ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, Book 4:4:10, John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, trans (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1079.

⁸ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 137.

⁹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church* (reprinted; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 8:350.

¹⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence* (Great Britain: Christian, Focus Publications, 2004), 61. The reader can find Calvin's Confession in James. T. Dennison's book on Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries: Vol. I.

¹¹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:353.

¹² James T. Dennison, Compiler, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 1:394.

¹³ Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 61.

¹⁴ Henry B. Smith, *Faith and Philosophy*, "Address before General Assembly of Presbyterian Church," St. Louis 1855, 98-9, quoted in Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:293.

¹⁵ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 142.

¹⁶ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 62. The reader can find a simple recap of what occurred in Reymond's book.

- ¹⁷ John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*, 142.
- ¹⁸ James T. Dennison, Compiler, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, 1:394.
- ¹⁹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:361.
- ²⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 65.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 66.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:369.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:368.
- ²⁵ Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 66. These songs were sung a *cappella*.
- ²⁶ Ford Lewis Battles, Assisted by John R. Walchenbach, *Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1980), 13.
- ²⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (French translation), quoted in B. B. Warfield's "Calvin and Calvinism," *In The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 5:390.
- ²⁸ B.B. Warfield, "On the Literary Criticism of the Institutes." *In The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 5:392.
- ²⁹ John Calvin, "The Epistle of Paul to the Romans," Vol XIX. *Calvin's Commentaries*. Trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Books), 24.
- ³⁰ Fr. August Tholuck, "Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans," 3d ed. 1831, 19, quoted in Phillip Schaff, *The Swiss Reformation*, *History of the Christian Church*, 8:282.
- ³¹ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:371.
- ³² John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, (Louisville: Westminster, 1981), 175.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith 1:2.
- ³⁵ John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, 176.
- ³⁶ John H. Leith, "Form of Administering Baptism," *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, 176.
- ³⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentary on Corinthians*, 1 Cor 2:3-7, 1:98-104, quoted in John H. Leith, "Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community", 176.
- ³⁸ John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community*, 176.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.
- ⁴⁰ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:371.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8:400.
- ⁴² T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 104.
- ⁴³ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:401.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:399.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:405.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8:399.
- ⁴⁷ T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 104.
- ⁴⁸ Philip Schaff, "The Swiss Reformation," *History of the Christian Church*, 8:425. Subsequent to Calvin's banishment, the regime was "demoralized and split up into factions."
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Dairmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 191-192.

CALVIN'S LATTER YEARS (1541-1564)

Jerry Gardner*

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, on July 10, 1509. In 1535, because of his close association with Nicolas Cop, rector of the University of Paris who announced for Martin Luther, Calvin fled Paris for Geneva. There he befriended Guillaume Farel, a French evangelist and founder of Reformed churches. Farel asked Calvin to remain in Geneva to assist in the city's reformation movement. Calvin stayed until 1538, when the people of Geneva voted against Farel and Calvin and asked both reformers to leave. Calvin went to Strasbourg where he met and married the widow Idelette de Bure. The couple had one child who died in infancy.

In 1541 the Genevans prevailed upon Calvin to return and to lead them again in reforming the church. He remained in Geneva for the rest of His life . . . His wife died in 1549, and he did not remarry. Although he received a house and a stipend from the government, . . . he did not become a citizen of Geneva until 1559.¹

Calvin was a provincial French lawyer, scholar, theologian, thinker, writer and ecclesiastical statesman, but he was also much, much more. Most notably, Calvin had a passion for preaching.

PREACHING SCHEDULE

George Gordon says that in Calvin's *Institutes*, "it is impossible not to feel the passion of the preacher."² Though Calvin was inclined to quiet study, his God-given preaching passion was evident throughout his public life in his demanding preaching schedule.

On Sunday he took always the New Testament, except for a few Psalms on Sunday afternoon. During the week . . . it was always the Old Testament. He took five years to complete the Book of Acts. He preached 46 sermons on Thessalonians, 186 on Corinthians, 86 on the Pastorals, 43 on Galatians, 48 on Ephesians. He spent five years on his Harmony of the Gospels. That was just his Sunday work! During the weekdays in those five years he preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, and 123 on Genesis.³

Calvin's preaching schedule was burdensome indeed. When one understands Calvin's health problems, it becomes clear that Calvin was called of God. It also becomes clear that Calvin had great respect for God's call. His

health was never robust; his illnesses included chronic asthma, indigestion, and catarrh, [an inflammation of the mucous membrane]. In 1558, he became very frail with the onset of quartan fever [a type of malaria in which the paroxysms or convulsions occur every fourth day]. He died on May 27, 1564 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Geneva.⁴

Calvin could easily echo Paul in 1 Cor 9:16: "for though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel."

REFORMATION WRITINGS

Calvin was a great leader of the Reformation. His abilities as thinker, scholar, writer, and preacher gave necessary impetus to the Reform movement. In fact,

Calvin . . . may well have saved Protestantism when it was at low ebb.

In Germany after Luther's death [1546], Charles V [of the Holy Roman Empire] was winning the war [against France]. While Wittenberg and the Elector of Saxony were vanquished, Calvinism was flourishing to the north and to the west.⁵

Calvinism flourished because of Calvin's God-given, unique talents. Calvin's *Institutes* had tremendous positive influence for Protestantism, but that positive influence was not due to the *Institutes* alone. In 1558 Calvin founded an academy to train ministers. Theodore Beza was rector of Calvin's "college" that soon would become a university. The school would make Geneva a European center of learning as new converts, seekers, and lost souls came to Geneva to sit, to listen, and to learn. More often than not, they left Geneva as missionaries. John Knox, for example, a former galley slave on the Mediterranean, got his training at Calvin's academy. When Knox left Geneva, he went home to Edinburgh in Scotland to send young ministers to learn from Calvin in Geneva. Geneva became a 16th century international center. Barzun says that Geneva was abuzz "with foreigners of all ages and origins. It was a 'Mecca' for the enthusiasts, a city of refuge for exiles."⁶

Additional influence for Protestantism came from Calvin's other writings. For example, he wrote letters to political figures across Europe commenting on the political changes on the continent. His letters showed his interest in statecraft, the results of which were more than ecclesiastical. Accordingly, Douglas F. Kelly writes,

after [Calvin] had drafted the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* for Geneva, . . . the satisfied town councils asked him to take time off from his preaching ministry in order to codify the purely civil and constitutional laws of Geneva. Calvin was well able to handle the . . . principles of legal codification because of his earlier training as a lawyer under some of the most famous legal minds of the day.⁷

"His Renaissance education . . . combined with" his scholarly mind and legal train-

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ing explain his bent to theological matters and legal concerns.⁸

An early and primary example of those theological and legal concerns is found in Calvin's dedicatory epistle in the first edition of his *Institutes*. He dedicated the first edition to Francis I, king of France. The dedication stands supreme as a defense of the persecuted evangelicals of France, of which Calvin was one. In the epistle, Calvin showed great concern for proper and ethical government. It was a refrain that would remain with him throughout his days.⁹

Additional influence to the advancement of the Reformation came from Calvin's commentary writings. He dedicated several commentaries to different rulers to encourage them not to hinder "the work of the Reformation."¹⁰

The commentaries on the Canonical Epistles honored Edward VI of England; the commentary on Isaiah was dedicated to Elizabeth I; and those on Hebrews 'to the Most Mighty and Most Serene Prince, Sigismund Augustus,¹¹ king of Poland.¹²

Calvin knew the influence rulers had, so he made use of their positions. It was not manipulative, nor was it unethical, but it was beneficial to the Reformation.

THE SERVETUS AFFAIR

The Michael Servetus affair came during Calvin's struggle with the Libertines. The city council, with Calvin's consent, had Servetus, an anti-Trinitarian, burned at the stake in Geneva on October 27, 1553. Servetus was found guilty of blasphemy, a crime punishable by death. It was a punishment consistent with the spirit of the age. Schaff, writing at the end of the 19th century, said, "From the

standpoint of modern Christianity, . . . the burning of Servetus admits to no justification. Even the most admiring biographers of Calvin lament and disapprove his conduct in this tragedy, which has spotted his fame and given to Servetus the glory of martyrdom."¹³ Taken out of context, Schaff's comment condemns Calvin's action, but Schaff does offer a moderate defense of Calvin when he says that we should consider Calvin's actions in the light of 16th century Europe and understand that his actions were consistent with the time. Calvin acted from "a strict sense of duty and in harmony with the public law and dominant sentiment of his age, which justified the death penalty for heresy and blasphemy, and abhorred toleration as involving indifference to the truth."¹⁴

According to Schaff, Calvin's act "was an error in judgment, but not of the heart, and must be excused, though it cannot be justified." Calvin's time was a "semi-barbarous" time. Heretics—perceived and real—abounded. Innocent women "were cruelly tortured and roasted to death." Rome had its Inquisition. France, under Rome's auspices, put to death Huguenots by the thousands. Thus, to judge John Calvin with 21st century standards of correctness is wrong indeed. Perhaps Calvin, from his viewpoint, would rise to condemn us and our 21st century tolerance and lack of zeal for truth. Some points of concern before we condemn Calvin are these: Servetus was guilty of blasphemy, his sentence was in accordance to the times, he had been sentenced to death by others, and the sentence was pronounced by the councils of Geneva. Further, Calvin visited Servetus in his last hours to bring a measure of comfort to the condemned man.

The Libertines were heretics who wanted freedom without law. They had little respect for Calvin's ideas about church government and church discipline; so they purposed to destroy any influence Calvin had. His struggle against these antinomians was so great at times that the reformer despaired of success against their attacks. He wrote to Farel on December 14, 1547, "Affairs are in such a state of confusion that I despair of being able longer to retain the Church, at least by my own endeavors. May the Lord hear your incessant prayers in our behalf," and three days later he wrote to Pierre Viret, a close friend, "Wickedness has now reached such a pitch here that I hardly hope that the Church can be upheld much longer, at least by means of my ministry."

For the most part, Calvin's enemies were the same as those who had driven him from his first stay in Geneva. According to Schaff, they never consented to his recall, and according to Calvin, the ruin of the church mattered little to them. Their desire was to have liberty to do as they pleased. They refused to be subject to laws. Calvin attributed their work to Satan and to Satan's workshop. "These evil-doers," he wrote, "were endowed with too great a degree of power to be easily overcome . . . [they] wished only for unbridled freedom." The battle was so great that Calvin wrote Viret, "believe me, my power is broken, unless God stretch forth his hand."

According to Schaff, the Libertines hated Calvin more than they hated the Pope. They named their dogs "Calvin" and phonetically twisted Calvin's name to rhyme with "Cain." The struggle lasted

until 1556. Just before its end, Calvin wrote to another friend "Dogs bark at me on all sides. Everywhere I am saluted with the name of 'heretic,' and all the calumnies that can possibly be invented are heaped upon me; in a word, the enemies among my own flock attack me with greater bitterness than my beloved enemies among the papists."

Schaff said that it seems incredible that a man of such poor health could triumph over such determined enemies over so long a time and still be able to carry out his so great duties. He attributed Calvin's victory to "the justice of his cause and the moral purity and 'majesty' of his character."

Calvin was humbled, not embittered; he was determined to serve God regardless of the unrivaled and unjustified trouble. He continued to discharge all his duties admirably. He even "found time to write some of his most important works."

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cause and the moral purity and ‘majesty’ of his character.” Calvin himself gave glory to God for sustaining him when he wrote, “I have every reason to be contented with the service of that good Master, who has accepted me and maintained me in the honorable office which I hold, however contemptible in the eyes of the world. I should, indeed, be ungrateful beyond measure if I did not prefer this condition to all the riches and honors of the world.” Calvin’s victory came in May of 1555 in Geneva, when the Libertines “were finally defeated by a failure of an attempted rebellion.” In light of these facts, John Calvin shines as a light of the Reformation, a godly man whom we do well to honor and emulate during this 500th anniversary of his birth. 📖

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¹“John Calvin (1509-1564): Biographical Sketch,” Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanted); www.covenanter.org, 1-3.

²George A. Gordon, *Ultimate Conceptions of Faith* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), 32.

³*Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3:2 (Summer 1999), as quoted in www.veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2008/02/28/wow-john-calvins, Feb. 28, 2008.

⁴“John Calvin (1509-1564): Biographical Sketch,” 1-3.

⁵Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 34-36.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th through the 18th Centuries* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992), 4-6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, transl. by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), ix.

¹² Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty*, 4-6.

¹³ Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 8:690-691.

¹⁴ Ibid. This and all subsequently quoted information are taken from this source.

“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction.”

2 Timothy 4:2

DEFINING AND DEFENDING

A BRIEF DEFINITION OF CALVINISM

Ben Dally¹

One of the oft-repeated commands God gave to the Israelites during their early history as a people was stated simply to remember (Deut 6:1-15, 8:1-20); to remember him, to remember his words, to recall his many great deeds, and to be careful that their entire lives were shaped in every detail by their accurate, consistent, obedient remembrances. Biblical history amply recounts many examples of Israel's failure in this regard, and the disastrous consequences that were reaped as a result. Failure to remember God and his words was an immeasurable offense as well as tragedy, and this truth is one that has continued to resound with deep relevance throughout history and into our own day.

As we remember the great servant of God, John Calvin, we primarily remember a man who through his life, his scholarship and his ministry thundered boldly in the midst of a church and in the midst of a cultural context which had largely forgotten the true words of God.² He sought to remind those who had ears to hear that the Almighty God had spoken, and that his words were to be heeded in all corners of public and private life. He was not seeking to invent a new system, or to create a new teaching—but to restate clearly what God had already said, and to apply it probingly to the minds and hearts of the individuals (and the institutions) of his place and time. History

tells us that John Calvin was to a great degree quite successful in this undertaking, in that his teachings were heard and accepted by many.³ As a result it is difficult to quantify the impact that this man's call to remember had on the path that history was to take concerning not only the church, but also Western society as a whole.⁴

If Calvin's doctrine and its practical implications (hereafter simply Calvinism) are in fact synonymous with Biblicism (which Calvinists assert), it is the writer's conviction that the people of God in our day and the culture at large also stand in need of this cry to remembrance, and would do well to visit and to revisit often what this great theologian has to say to us about the character, works and words of God. To that end this essay will attempt to cursorily define the system commonly known as Calvinism, then briefly expound its main tenets, and thirdly propose several ways in which Calvinistic doctrine impacts practical life in both the public and private sectors.

To begin, "Calvinism" represents different things in the minds of different people. For some, the term denotes simply what is contained in the writings of John Calvin himself, primarily as expressed in his final edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his expansive biblical commentary, and his other treatises on various subjects and pieces of correspondence. To others, Calvinism is primarily to be understood

as the doctrinal system espoused by those who deem themselves the “Reformed” churches in distinction from Lutheranism, Anabaptism, and other progeny of what might be loosely grouped together under the term “Protestant.” This generally coherent doctrinal system (though certainly not entirely uniform in every detail), as expressed in various Reformed formulas and confessions, is primarily acknowledged to have been derived from the teachings of John Calvin. Perhaps its most general (and most well known) formulation was composed at the Synod of Dort in 1618, in response to the Five Points of Arminianism derived from the teachings of Jacobus Arminius and his followers. A third and perhaps the most broad definition of Calvinism, according to B. B. Warfield, is “the entire body of conceptions, theological, ethical, philosophical, social, political, which, under the influence of the master mind of John Calvin, raised itself to dominance in the Protestant lands of the post-Reformation age, and has left a permanent mark not only upon the thought of mankind, but upon the life-history of men, the social order of civilized peoples, and even the political organization of States.”⁵ Obviously there is great overlap among these three definitions; however, for sake of clarity and for the purpose of this article, Calvinism will be defined in accordance with the second definition given above, most popularly known as TULIP, the “Five Points of Calvinism,” or the doctrines of grace. We will briefly define and expound these points and then trace some of the practical implications of these basic Calvinistic propositions.

It is perhaps most important to begin with an overarching construct consisting of the Calvinist’s acknowledgment of the centrality of the immensity of the glory

and absolute sovereignty of God. B. B. Warfield can be quoted as saying that at its most basic, “Calvinism is that sight of the majesty of God that pervades all of life and all of experience.”⁶ To quote at greater length, according to Warfield, Calvinism is

a profound apprehension of God in His majesty, with the poignant realization which inevitably accompanies this apprehension, of the relation sustained to God by the creature. The Calvinist is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God’s sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God who receives sinners. He who believes in God without reserve and is determined that God shall be God to him in all his

He was not seeking to invent a new system, or to create a new teaching—but to restate clearly what God had already said, and to apply it probingly to the minds and hearts of the individuals (and the institutions) of his place and time. History tells us that John Calvin was to a great degree quite successful in this undertaking.

thinking, feeling, and willing—in the entire compass of his life activities, intellectual, moral and spiritual—throughout all his individual social and religious relations, is, by force of that strictest of all logic which presides over the outworking of principles into thought and life, by the very necessity of the case, a Calvinist.”⁷

This grand vision of the absolute majesty of God, which was so crucial to the experience of John Calvin (as well as Jonathan Edwards and other great Calvinists), rightly lays the foundation for the rest of the system—not only in a philosophical sense, but in a practical and experiential sense as well.⁸ Following from this commitment to seeing, understanding and seeking to reveal the glory of God, the following “Five Points of Calvinism” can be elaborated within their greater context as they deal primarily with God, his relationship to man, and what is necessary for man’s salvation.

Point 1: Total Depravity

This doctrine answers the question, “Why and from what does man need to be saved?” Total depravity is the biblical assertion that when man fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, the disastrous effects were total, meaning that they extended into every facet of creation and into every facet of man himself—mind, body, spirit and will. As a result, man in his natural state is now spiritually dead, is bound helplessly by the Devil and by sin, is incapable of comprehending the things of the Spirit of God, is corrupt in his very nature and is given over perpetually to sin in his thoughts, attitudes and behavior (Rom 5:12; Eph 2:1-3; 2 Tim 2:25; 1 Cor 2:14; Ps 51:5; Rom 6:15-23; 7:21-24; Gen

6:5). As one who is spiritually dead, man is worthy only of eternal damnation (Rom 3:23), and because he is absolutely dead, he is completely unable even to open his eyes or to turn his head towards God—much less muster up faith, love or worship to him, just as a physically dead man is unable to open his eyes or to turn his head. For this reason, man must be brought back to life, “born again,” regenerated—he can in no way save himself, prepare himself for salvation, or cause himself to believe. This must be an act of Almighty God, the Creator of all things, he who raises the dead, the only one whose words make what is from what was not (Jer 13:23; Eph 2:4-10). Because of the extent to which our sin has completely incapacitated us, salvation must be truly of the Lord, from beginning to end (Ps 3:8; Jonah 2:9; Rev 7:10).

Point 2: Unconditional Election

Unconditional election answers the question, “On what basis is man saved?” This doctrine teaches that those whom God delivers from sin and death, he does so according to his good pleasure alone, in accordance with his will as held from eternity past, not on the basis of any good thing in any man (as all are totally depraved and worthy of eternal damnation), or because of any foreknown faith or good works that would be performed at some point in life. God’s choosing of individuals to be saved is his own sovereign prerogative, and serves to magnify his absolute sovereignty in choosing whom he will and in passing over whom he will.

This doctrine illuminates the immeasurable bounty of his kindness and grace that chooses to give life to some who deserve only death. This doctrine also

stands firmly against any form of self-righteousness in any man who would want to attribute any goodness to himself or make any presumptuous claim on the mercy of God, as though he had any boast to make before the Almighty King. God's election serves his purposes and is for the sake of his glory, and therefore leaves man with no response other than awe and wonder toward God, and gratitude for his completely undeserved kindness (Deut 7:7, Luke 4:25-27, John 15:6, Rom 9, Eph 1:4-5).

Point 3: Limited Atonement

The doctrine of limited atonement answers the question, "Who exactly is to be saved?" This doctrine teaches that the atoning work of Christ at the cross made full and perfect satisfaction for the sins of the elect (those whom God had chosen in eternity) only, not for all men in general or for no man in particular, which is essentially no man at all. On one end of the spectrum lie the Universalists, who claim that Christ died to save all men, and therefore, all men will be saved. This we know to be biblically untenable in that all men are not saved (Matt 7:13-14), and therefore it is nonsensical to believe that the efficacy of the atonement extends to all men.

Arminians stand in the middle saying that Christ died for no one in particular, but potentially for anyone who will believe or 'decide for' Christ, at which moment of faith the atonement becomes efficacious to the new believer. This, of course, is inconsistent with both the biblical doctrines of total depravity and unconditional election, in that a spiritually dead man cannot 'decide for Christ' and therefore apply redemption to himself, as well as the fact that salvation is of God

alone on the basis of his sovereign election only and not on man's choosing when he would like to be saved. This making a mockery of the biblical teaching regarding God's sovereignty, essentially makes man more powerful than God in his own salvation. In the Bible it is clear that Christ died to save "his people," "his sheep," and gave himself up for the church specifically and not for mankind in general (Eph 1:4; John 17:9; Matt 26:28; Eph 5:25; Rom 4:25; Isa 53:11; John 6:37). The price that Jesus paid will be ineffectual in no sense. Every man whom Christ paid for will be saved, and they only.

God's choosing of individuals to be saved is his own sovereign prerogative, and serves to magnify his absolute sovereignty in choosing whom he will and in passing over whom he will.

Point 4: Irresistible Grace

The doctrine of irresistible grace is perhaps most simply explained by Rom 8:29, which states, "Those whom he predestined he also called." God not only elects or chooses men in eternity past, he also effects the means by which their salvation is made efficacious by applying his grace to them through his call. The central question that is answered by this doctrine is, "Is God's plan ever thwarted?" Biblically speaking, the answer is a resounding "NO," and this applies to the salvation of men as much as to anything. If God has purposed to save

a man, and has elected him from the foundations of eternity, then it follows unavoidably that that man will receive God's call and his grace, and will be saved by it. In other words, man's will cannot ultimately overpower God's will, as God is sovereign, and man is not (John 6:37; 6:44-45; Rom 8:14; Gal 1:15; 1 Pet 5:10).

Point 5: Perseverance of the Saints

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (stated in other words by some as "the Perseverance of God") conveys the idea that those whom God saves can never lose their salvation, but will persevere to the end by the grace of God. Again this doctrine speaks to the immutability and absolute sovereign power of God, which cannot be thwarted by man in any way. Man cannot wriggle himself free from the grasp of the Almighty, and God himself in his faithfulness provides all that is needed for his children to be sustained, protected, and nurtured toward maturity in Christ to the very end. They will not be cast off, or wander off on their own, but ultimately will be brought to the purpose that God has decreed for them. Again, Rom 8:29 is instructive: "And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." We see that there is a progression that is rooted in the sovereign decree of God. Those whom he chooses will be glorified, and neither the will of man nor the assault of the enemy will ever be able to undermine his sovereign will (Phil 1:6; John 6:39; 10:28; Rom 5:10; 8:1, 28-39).

By way of conclusion, the above doctrines lead to several implications. On both the levels of biblical and systematic theology, the "Five Points of Calvinism" are well documented and supported both

textually and logically. However, beyond theological formulation at an abstract level, lies the urgent need of the church and the world today to appropriate in understanding and in practice the full weight of these propositions.

Today's culture is opposed to the idea of a God who has supreme power and who rightfully demands unwavering loyalty from man, and is bent on a view of mankind that exalts his self-determination and the weight of his own right to have no master but himself. In this culture and church that continue to lose their bearings and give in to idolatry the basic tenets of Calvinism sound a clarion call. In a world and in a church where the understanding of the heinousness of sin has all but disappeared, the doctrine of total depravity calls us to remember the wages of sin and the degree to which each of us in every facet of our being has been infected and stands under the sentence of death. In a context where our self-confidence and the fashioning of God in our own likeness has all but eliminated awareness of the fact that we cannot save ourselves no matter how positively we think, or how morally we attempt to live, Calvinism clearly presents the unmerited favor of God for sinners, and the unfolding plan of the Almighty God that cannot be thwarted by any power or principality, be it man or the Devil himself. In a world that wonders what the truth is, or what the purpose of life is—hopelessly resigned to an unknown fate, Calvinism stretches forth the gracious revelation of God himself unto the knowledge of the highest end man could ever comprehend, to know, to enjoy, and to glorify God both now and forever.

Calvinism certainly has its consequences, and failure to remember the words, works and character of God as set forth in the Scripture and taught by Calvinism also has dire consequences, many of which are sadly visible in the world and in the church today. May God continue to raise up more and more men who, like John Calvin, will boldly and clearly call people to remember—to remember their God, to remember his character, his works and his words; and might the course of history be set on a new trajectory, to the glory and praise of God. 📖

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² Cairns, Earle E., *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 272-274.

³ *Ibid.*, 300-305.

⁴ Shelly, Bruce L., *Church History in Plain Language* (Nashville: Nelson, 1995), 260-262.

⁵ Warfield, B. B., "Calvinism," Johann Jakob Herzog, Philip Schaff, Albert Hauck, eds., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 1:359.

⁶ Warfield, B.B., *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today*, quoted in A. N. Martin, *The Practical Implications of Calvinism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, 302-303.

IN DEFENSE OF THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN CALVIN Edward T. Oliver¹

Seldom in history does a man appear on the earthly scene in an optimum time, possessed of talents of intellect and leadership that he may use to influence his own age and those to follow. Less often will such a man's influence be so completely to the good in what he teaches and exemplifies. So many influential men leave muddy tracks across the surface where they have trod, whether in teaching or living. Of John Calvin it may be said that both his doctrine and the example of his life have been beneficial to his own age and to subsequent ages.

In John Calvin, time, place, and talent were ordained by God. Indeed, regarding him it may be said, "Thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esth 4:11). From the influence of Calvin came forth a complete theological system, numerous church denominations, Christian nations, missionary organizations, and great educational institutions.

The influence of Calvinism has issued forth like a river. As the Rhone River flows from the glacier Rhone in the mighty Swiss Alps into Lake Geneva, is purified, and flows clear blue to the Mediterranean, so we may speak of the river of Calvinism flowing from Geneva to the whole globe, more deep and pervading in some countries than others—but always bringing the highest influences from the God of truth.

However, many would dispute this analysis of Calvin's influence. His opponents and detractors are legion from both secular and religious quarters, from past

and contemporary sources. What was said of Jesus, “He was despised and rejected of men” (Isa 53:3), may also, in a lesser way, be said of John Calvin. Divisions over Calvin’s teachings run the gamut from adoration to sanguinary hatred. His opponents mince no words in venting their literary spleens. Most of these antagonists are equally severe in their judgments of his doctrine and his personal influence.

Among Calvin’s detractors are many Roman Catholic writers. Roman Catholic leaders have hated him for joining the Reformation of Geneva and aiding the city’s total break from the dominion of Rome. Calvin succeeded in solidifying the reform effort in Geneva by giving the church a systematic doctrinal foundation and being the prime mover in establishing a Christian commonwealth based on Scripture. Roman Catholic leaders resented vehemently Calvin’s establishing a community based on faith rather than works and struck back in every possible manner. Philip Schaff quoted one later writer, Dr. M. S. Spaulding, archbishop of Baltimore from 1864 to 1872, who wrote of Calvin: “His reign in Geneva was truly a reign of terror. He combined the cruelty of Danton and Robespierre.... He was a very Nero!... He was a monster of impurity and iniquity.... He ended his life in despair, and died of a most shameful and disgusting disease.”² Such references are, without a doubt, beyond the pale of reality and truth. Furthermore, they ring a hollow sound coming from a clergyman of an organization that used the Inquisition to further its own cause.

Another formidable opponent of John Calvin was a group known as the Libertines, who lived in Geneva. These were

men who originally sided with the early reform movement in the break from the hated Roman Catholic rulers of Geneva but reacted negatively to the rule of the gospel which the Protestant reformers implemented under Calvin and other churchmen. These citizens threatened the very existence of the reform effort and caused Calvin and the Geneva community great difficulty. Indeed, many believed that these Libertines would have given Geneva over to the French if they could have defeated Calvin—and they almost did. Schaff describes the Libertine mindset toward Calvin:

They hated him worse than the pope. They abhorred the very word “discipline.” They resorted to personal indignities and every device of intimidation; they nick-named him “Cain,” and gave his name to the dogs of the street; they insulted him on his way to the lecture-room; they fired one night fifty shots before his bedchamber; they threatened him in the pulpit; they approached the communion table to wrest the sacred elements from his hands, but he refused to profane the sacrament and overawed them.³

Such was the severity of the hatred and opposition to Calvin. Clearly, Calvin believed this opposition was against the gospel, not him personally, and treated it in that way. Some will describe Calvin’s treatment of the Libertines as extreme and unworthy of any Christian leader at any time or place. However, the age of Calvin was a time for establishing the most important movement in church history since the first century. The direction of the whole course of history was at stake in these conflicts. The movement that saw

the resurrecting of the great doctrines of God's grace was in its natal stage and required strong measures in its defense. The success of the gospel in the 16th century often required strong regulations and, when possible, the use of fortified cities or the help of benevolent kings to

Divisions over Calvin's teachings run the gamut from adoration to sanguinary hatred. His opponents mince no words in venting their literary spleens. Most of these antagonists are equally severe in their judgments of his doctrine and his personal influence.

weather the mighty counterattacks of Satan.

As Schaff notes: "After the final collapse of the Libertine party in 1556, the peace was not seriously disturbed, and Calvin's work progressed without interruption. The authorities of the State were as zealous for the honor of the Church and the glory of Christ as the ministers of the gospel."⁴ This peace freed Calvin and other churchmen to concentrate on the reform efforts until his death in 1564. The victory of Calvin over such internal enemies would mean untold value for the cause of Christ through subsequent ages.

So much did the work of the Lord permeate and dominate the city-state of Geneva that John Knox called it "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles."⁵ Regardless of the success of the reformed movement in the Protestant world, certain modern writers have joined in the attacks on John Calvin both against the man, the *ad hominem* fallacy, and especially against the doctrines he espoused. Regarding his life, they often simply regurgitate the old accusations of detractors of the past.

What is more serious are the attacks on the doctrines which Calvin taught. One such opponent is Dave Hunt, who assails Calvinism in a recent book titled *What Love Is This?* Tim LaHaye actually declared that this "may well be the most important book written in the 21st century"—an exaggerated claim for any book, let alone this one. Hunt declares, "There is a great deal contained in Calvin's writings which every true believer must admit was at the least, serious error and in some cases outright heresy."⁶ Charging a man with heresy is a very serious matter. Hunt does this with blatant effrontery. The record of Calvin's teaching is otherwise. No doubt, millions of true believers would not agree that Calvin taught serious error, let alone that he taught heresy.

Hunt levels his main attack against the so-called Five Points of Calvinism. He takes each point and attempts to show how unscriptural it is. He gives special attention to the doctrine of predestination. Hunt states, "We will examine those scriptures and in the process we will see that in the Bible predestination/election is *never* unto salvation."⁷ Hunt is clearly

in error in making this claim. Many texts of the Bible lucidly teach that election is unto salvation. One such is Eph 1:5: "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." Surely being adopted by God as a son relates to salvation! Doubtless, without fear of justifiable contradiction, we may state that the doctrines of Calvin are based solidly on Holy Scripture.

A believer may observe with perfect confidence that what Paul taught, especially in Romans and Galatians, is what Calvin taught, no more no less. When one argues against the doctrine of predestination, he is arguing not against John Calvin but against what the Apostle Paul clearly taught in such passages as Romans 9.

Basic to Calvin's doctrine is its strong emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God in every aspect of man's relations with him. From this foundational truth flows the doctrine of predestination. Scripture is clear on this when Paul declares that the believer has been "predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Eph 1:11). This doctrine has been restated through history in the major creeds of the Reformed faith, a part of the Calvin legacy, including the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Westminster Confession of Faith; and it has blessed the hearts of millions of believers with full assurance of their salvation and a deep gratitude for God's unmerited favor.

As a "tree is known by its fruit" (Matt 12:33) so a doctrine or a movement may be known by its effects or its results. The influences of Calvinism are a testimony

to the truthfulness of the doctrinal teachings and constitute a part of the defense of John Calvin. The doctrinal river that continues to flow out of Geneva has been positive in many ways.

Consider the Calvinist influence in Christian missions. Out of the Calvinist centers of activity and influence came forth the greatest missionary movement of church history since the first century: the 19th century worldwide effort to reach the masses with the gospel. The movement was initiated by William Carey, a confirmed Calvinist in doctrine, who went to India and motivated untold numbers of missionaries who became a part of this amazing outreach. Carey entitled his mission agency: "The Particular [Calvinistic] Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen."⁸ In choosing this title for his agency, Carey was demonstrating the harmony that exists between the biblical points of Calvinistic doctrine and the evangelistic effort to "preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

**The missionary influence
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Indeed, John Calvin was a man with a missionary mind and heart. He was in no wise indifferent to the Great Commission as some have charged. Although many beleaguered Christians fled to Geneva for refuge from Roman Catholic

persecution, out of Geneva poured forth numerous missionaries to the countries of Europe, including Italy and especially Calvin's own France. During a period of intense evangelizing in Calvin's native land great numbers of converts embraced Calvinism, including many of the aristocracy. New evangelical churches were cropping up throughout France, and the elect were being brought to faith in Christ in great numbers.⁹ An effort was made even to send preachers to Brazil to spread the gospel. The claim that Calvinism means death to evangelism and missions cannot be sustained by the record.

John Calvin's own life was filled with soul winning. In the 16th century most people were convinced that God exists and the Bible is God's Word, yet they did not understand the true meaning of Scripture. During this time, much evangelism was accomplished by debating what Scripture actually taught. Who will deny that Luther's debate with John Eck at Leipzig led to the salvation of souls?

John Calvin engaged in similar debates. One such was held in the Swiss city of Lausanne in 1536. William Farel, leader of the Genevan reform in its early days, opened the debate with a challenge to the Roman Catholic representatives: "Let Holy Scriptures alone be the judge. If the truth is on your side, step forward!"¹⁰ For three days Farel vainly attempted to get Calvin to speak. Calvin replied, "Why should I interfere?"¹¹ On the fourth day, surprisingly, Calvin rose and spoke. Though by nature of a retiring temperament, he could remain silent no longer. He gave a forceful dissertation on the spiritual nature of the Lord's Supper in contrast to the Catholic Mass. After a time of silence, when the perspir-

ing Calvin sat down, a Franciscan friar by the name of Jean Tandy, moved by the truth from Calvin's lips, rose and declared:

It seems to me that the sin against the Spirit which the Scriptures speak of is the stubbornness which rebels against manifest truth. In accordance with that which I have heard, I confess to be guilty, because of ignorance I have lived in error and I have spread wrong teaching. I ask God's pardon for everything I have said and done against His honor; and ask the pardon of all of you people for the offense which I gave with my preaching up until now. I defrock myself henceforth to follow Christ and His pure doctrine alone."¹²

God's Holy Spirit used the disputation at Lausanne to turn many hearts to the rediscovered gospel of Christ. In time, two hundred priests of Rome joined the Reformation in the Canton of the Vaud. Among these were some of the strongest defenders of Rome who crossed over to the evangelical side.¹³ The missionary influence of John Calvin was the seed of an outreach that continues until the present day.

Calvin's positive influences extended beyond the more spiritual and ecclesiastical into other significant realms, namely, government, economics, and education. Calvin's influence on government was nothing less than revolutionary. He taught a hitherto unheard of idea, based on Scripture, that lower magistrates may, in some cases, lead a revolt against an entrenched king who denies basic liberties to his subjects. Calvin explained the concept in *Institutes of Christian Religion*:

The former class of deliverers [lower magistrates or princes] being brought forward by the lawful call of God to perform such deeds, when they took up arms against kings, did not all violate that majesty with which kings are invested by divine appointment, but armed from heaven, they, by a greater power, curbed a less.... So far am I from forbidding these officially to check the undue license of kings.¹⁴

By reason of this principle, Calvin's influence on nations extended into the future far beyond his own times. As Georgia Harkness claimed, "Calvinism gave rise to the spirit of independence, and fomented revolutions."¹⁵ Calvin's influence, through this principle, was a primary factor in the break for liberty which took place in America in 1775. Although most Anglicans remained faithful to King George, Calvinistic colonists no longer feared that they would be sinning against God to seek independence from the king. As George Bancroft stated, "The first public voice in America for dissolving all connections with Great Britain, came . . . from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians."¹⁶

The river of Calvinism is also found in the worlds of economics and business. Credit capitalism, which spawned the industrial revolution, came about in part from the application of economic teachings of John Calvin and his followers. R. H. Tawney writes: "In doing so they [Calvinists] naturally started from a frank recognition of the necessity of capital, credit and banking, large-scale commerce and finance, and the other practical facts of business life."¹⁷

In early America, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian entrepreneurs led the way in business and investment enterprises.

They were armed with Calvin's teaching that it is not contrary to God's Word to make a profit in business. Businessmen like John Wanamaker, William Dodge, Cyrus McCormick, and William Henry Belk, to name a few, were Calvinistic Christians who profited from the biblical economic principles of John Calvin. Calvin was not promoting greed but a Christian use of wealth. Knowing their accountability to God, these men and others like them commonly used their profits to further the kingdom of Christ. The great prosperity of America had a Calvinistic stamp at its beginning.


In the realm of education Calvin's influence has not been minimal. In the United States especially, men, moved and energized by Calvinistic doctrine, attempted to spread the truth of the gospel by establishing colleges and lower schools. The colleges of Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Bowdoin, Miami of Ohio, Williams, Amherst, and the University of Delaware are only some of the institutions founded by the Calvinists of America.

Calvinistic educators also made wide use of the printed page. America's children were given a sound Christian Calvinistic foundation when learning to read by using John Cotton's *New England Primer*, which included the biblical truth, "In Adam's Fall we sinned all."

Moreover, Noah Webster's *The Blue Back Speller* was used by thousands of school children. Webster's original dictionary, published in 1828, was produced with a view to advancing and preserving Christianity in America by the proper definitions of words and was on the desks of thousands of school children. Along with his theological definitions Webster defined America as a republic and certainly

not a democracy. Webster despised the term democracy as a description of America's new government.

Calvinism was a prominent influence in Webster's life, as it was in that of W. Holmes McGuffey, the Presbyterian educator and author of the renowned *Eclectic Readers*. Early editions of the *Eclectic Reader* spread Bible truth and the Calvinist theistic worldview throughout the American colonies. In the introduction to the *Fourth Reader*, McGuffey stated, "In a Christian country, that man is to be pitied, who . . . can honestly object to imbuing the minds of youth with the language and spirit of the Word of God."¹⁸

John Calvin's influences have flowed far and wide, blessing men and nations wherever they have gone. The magnitude of what Calvin accomplished through his life, preaching, and writings speaks to his willingness to be used by God in an extraordinary way. Calvin's influences, as an early doctrinal reformer and missionary statesman, stretch far beyond his own time and place. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and Bible commentaries are studied today by countless individuals and in colleges, seminaries, churches, and Sunday schools. Indeed, the church of Christ has been enriched by the impact of Calvin's life and letters for nearly 450 years. It may be certainly said of him, as it was of the patriarch Abel, "He being dead yet speaketh" (Heb 11:4). 

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² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*

(1910; reprinted Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 8:520.

³ *Ibid.*, 8:496.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:510.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:518.

⁶ Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This?: Calvinism's Misrepresentation of God* (Sisters, Ore.: Loyal, 2002), 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁸ G. Smith, *Short History of Christian Missions* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d.), 162.

⁹ A. E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (7th ed.; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 189.

¹⁰ E. Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life*, transl. by D. G. Gelzer (2nd ed.; Richmond, Vir.: John Knox Press, 1961), 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 53.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Institutes*, 4:20:30-31.

¹⁵ G. Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (New York: Holt, 1931), 86.

¹⁶ M. A. Beliles and S. K. McDowell, *America's Providential History* (Charlottesville, Vir.: Providence Foundation, 1996), 141.

¹⁷ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), 93.

¹⁸ J. H. Westerhoff III, *McGuffey and His Readers* (Milford, Mich.: Mott Media, 1978), 61.

IMPACT

CALVIN AND MISSIONS

Keith Coleman¹

The year 2009 marks the 500th anniversary of the birth of the great Reformer John Calvin. This is the same man whose ideas of representative government, establishing the rights and liberties of citizens, and the Christian work ethic led to the Industrial and Scientific Revolutions, developing the most productive and prosperous societies in history. Through his writings and teachings, John Calvin dominated European and American history for centuries. Some of the greatest philosophers, writers, Reformers, and Christian leaders in history have described themselves as Calvinists. Some of John Calvin's influential disciples include John Knox, Oliver Cromwell, John Owen, John Milton, Richard Baxter, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, George Whitefield, William Carey, William Wilberforce, Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Spurgeon, David Livingstone, the Covenanters in Scotland, the Huguenots of France, and the Pilgrim founders of America.

On the other hand, over the centuries there has been no lack of criticism of John Calvin and the theological system called Calvinism. There is also criticism in the area of missions and the fulfillment of the Great Commission, as we understand it today. It would seem that some find this as a shortcoming not only of John Calvin, but also of the entire Reformation period:

Neither the Reformation in the sixteenth, nor Puritanism in the seventeenth century, was possessed of any

foreign missionary zeal ... Luther and Zwingli, Calvin and Melancthon, Knox and Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, were too absorbed by the problems at their door, to see far afield....

A study of the lives of Milton and Bunyan, of Baxter and Fox, of Hampden and Marvell will reveal no urge to foreign missionary effort.²

The Lord's command to go and make disciples of all nations was for a long time understood by theologians to have been given only to the apostles and fulfilled by them. It was thought that the nations which had neglected or rejected the opportunity then given could be left to their well-deserved fate. A few among the Protestants did not so understand the Lord's command.³

It is true that the missionary spirit among many groups during the Reformation period was feeble at best. The obstacles to a legitimate world evangelization were formidable.⁴ Yet one notable exception was the missionary enterprise of Huguenot Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon, in the year 1555. Sailing with two ships to Brazil and landing on an island off of today's Rio de Janeiro, he erected a settlement with the intent to establish a haven for the religiously persecuted in France and Spain, and to "constitute a Church in that country reformed according to the word of God."⁵ Within a short time Villegagnon appealed to Calvin for more French settlers. Calvin appointed to this newly formed expedition two ministers, Richer and Chartier, along with twelve French exiles and others. By

November 1556 three ships, including the Genevans, had sailed for Brazil. Landing in early 1557, Villegagnon had by that time established an order of worship, and had made serious plans to advance the gospel to the mainland inhabitants. Yet in the months following Villegagnon became disenchanted with Calvinism and turned against the Genevans. Tragically, the colony basically was finished long before the arrival of the Portuguese in 1560.

An important footnote to this mission is that, although John Calvin was indeed interested in this overseas missionary enterprise, as witnessed by his correspondence and the appointment of ministers, there were a number of sixteenth century realities that ultimately limited its overall success. Blame for the tragic failure of the Brazil colony could not be placed at his feet. Dr. Joel Beeke gives three legitimate reasons to view Calvin's missionary interests in a much more favorable light:

1. Time constraints: the need to build "truth" in the infant Reformation church, and thus build a foundation upon which the mission church can be built.
2. Work at home: the establishment of the church at home first, in fulfillment of the Great Commission.
3. Government restrictions: most European governments being controlled by the Roman Catholic Church.⁶

If direct intervention in "overseas foreign missions" was not deemed plausible or successful, the amazing work Calvin did in ministering to the refugees who were fleeing persecution from the Catho-

lic Church might be seen as a brilliant missionary move.

Since Geneva was French-speaking, the vast majority of refugees came from France. As they sat under Calvin's teaching in the Cathedral of St. Pierre, the French refugees' hearts stirred for their homeland. Many of them felt compelled to return to France with the Protestant gospel.

Calvin, however, did not want to send uneducated missionaries back to the dangers of Catholic France. He believed that a good missionary had to be a good theologian first. And so he inspired and educated them. He trained them theologically, tested their preaching ability, and carefully scrutinized their moral character. Calvin and the Genevan Consistory sent properly trained missionaries back to France to share the Gospel.

Calvin did not just educate them and send men back to France. These missionaries did not just become photographic memories on Calvin's refrigerator door. On the contrary, Calvin remained intimately involved in all that they were doing.

The Genevan archives hold hundreds of letters containing Calvin's pastoral and practical advice on establishing underground churches. He did not just send missionaries; he invested himself in long-term relationships with them.

Concrete information exists from the year 1555 onwards. The data indicate that by 1555, there were five underground Protestant churches in France. By 1559, the number of these Protestant churches jumped to more than

one hundred. And scholars estimate that by 1562 there were more than 2,150 churches established in France with approximately three million Protestant souls in attendance.

This can only be described as an explosion of missionary activity, detonated in large part by the Genevan Consistory and other Swiss Protestant cities. Far from being disinterested in missions, history shows that Calvin was enraptured by it.⁷

So even as Geneva had become a center for refugees and, in truth, a missionary hub, Calvinism and the gospel spread throughout Europe. In France, for example, the Reformed church grew from 100 in 1555 to 2150 by 1562. "From 1555 to 1562 we know for sure that 88 preachers were sent from Geneva into France. Of these, nine laid down their lives as martyrs. There may have been more than 88."⁸

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From France to England, Scotland, Poland, Hungary, and the Netherlands, evangelism reached the hearts of the masses, and the Reformed church grew as a direct result of the ministry of John Calvin and other Reformed leaders. John

Calvin never presented a systematic theology of missions in his writings. However, it has been shown not only that a coherent theology of missions can be reconstructed from his writings, but that Calvin considered Geneva to be a "missionary center" for the evangelization of France, the rest of Europe, and even the New World. Perhaps the reason why no systematic theology of missions can be found in his writings is because missions was central to his ministry in Geneva. Missions was not a "section" of his systematic theology, it was central to what he was trying to accomplish in his ministry.⁹

In support of the above, possibly the strongest evidence of Calvin's heart for missions, which is really evangelism, can be found in his own words. Sermons, commentaries, his *Institutes*, and personal correspondence provide an unhindered glimpse to his Scriptural position. Take, for example, his commentary on Heb 10:25

Having said, "Not forsaking the assembling together," he adds, But exhorting one another; by which he intimates that all the godly ought by all means possible to exert themselves in the work of gathering together the Church on every side; for we are called by the Lord on this condition, that every one should afterwards strive to lead others to the truth, to restore the wandering to the right way, to extend a helping hand to the fallen, to win over those who are without. But if we ought to bestow so much labor on those who are yet aliens to the flock of Christ, how much more diligence is required in exhorting the brethren whom God has already joined to us?¹⁰

Did Calvin here not indicate that the godly are to use all means to win over those who are aliens to the flock? No geographical boundaries are presented, but simply to be in obedience to the Lord's commands—this was Calvin's directive.

In his sermon on 2 Tim 1:8-9, he writes:

If the gospel be not preached, Jesus Christ is, as it were, buried. Therefore, let us stand as witnesses, and do Him this honor, when we see all the world so far out of the way; and remain steadfast in this wholesome doctrine... Let us here observe that St. Paul condemns our unthankfulness, if we be so unfaithful to God, as not to bear witness of His gospel; seeing He hath called us to it.

Is he not saying that the lack of evangelism was as if Christ was still in the tomb and an indication of our unthankfulness?¹¹

A third example comes from his sermon on 1 Tim 2:3-5. Calvin writes:

Thus we may see what St. Paul's meaning is when he saith, God will have His grace made known to all the world, and His gospel preached to all creatures. Therefore, we must endeavor, as much as possible, to persuade those who are strangers to the faith, and seem to be utterly deprived of the goodness of God, to accept of salvation. Jesus Christ is not only a Savior of few, but He offereth Himself to all. As often as the gospel is preached to us, we ought to consider that God calleth us to Him: and if we attend to this call, it shall not be in vain, neither shall it be lost labor. Therefore, we may be so much the

more assured that God taketh and holdeth us for His children, if we endeavor to bring those to Him who are afar off. Let us comfort ourselves, and take courage in this our calling: although there be at this day a great forlornness, though we seem to be miserable creatures, utterly cast away and condemned, yet we must labor as much as possible to draw those to salvation who seem to be afar off. And above all things, let us pray to God for them, waiting patiently till it please Him to show His good will toward them, as He hath shown it to us.¹²

Here the preacher recognized that we must labor, as much as possible, to bring the lost to salvation.

One final sample is in a sermon on Acts 1:7, where we read,

Now we know that God prizes nothing above his honour, which lies mainly in men's knowing him and poor souls' being brought to salvation. So let us not be surprised if our Lord wants his gospel to be proclaimed with such diligence that nothing can hinder its course. For the only way men can come to salvation is through instruction in what the Bible teaches. Now since this is God's will, let us follow it.¹³

The necessity of the strong and confident proclamation of the gospel is clear in Calvin's plea.

With these very few examples we have a reliable indication as to the evangelistic, missionary heart of John Calvin. Combined with the above mentioned missionary endeavors, we may be confident that the work of missions during the Refor-

mation, albeit in an infant stage, was genuine.

The final stage which legitimizes Calvin's involvement in missions comes with the history that followed his ministry. A study of missions history will reveal many familiar names, all Calvinists. Beginning with pioneer Baptist missionary William Carey (1761-1834), father of the modern missions movement, we can continue to John Patton (New Hebrides), Henry Martyn (India and Persia), Jonathan Goforth (China), and Adoniram Judson (Burma). Congregationalist David Brainard (1718-1747), missionary to the American Indians, found funding from the Presbyterians in Scotland. We need also to mention Calvinists such as Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and countless others. By the end of the 19th century it could be said that one-quarter of all Protestant missionaries in the world were Presbyterian. Such was, and continues to be, the influence of John Calvin on that great century of foreign missions.

One final quote from B. B. Warfield's article on *Calvinism*:

Calvinism has been proved an eminent incentive to all missionary enterprises, domestic and foreign. It is of course acknowledged that several Christian bodies not characterized by what are generally regarded as the peculiarities of Calvinism have been in the highest degree distinguished by missionary zeal and efficiency.... The charter of the Society of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was granted by the Calvinistic Prince, William III. It is to the Calvinistic Baptists that the impulse to modern Protestant missions is to be traced, and the Calvin-

istic churches are today behind none in their zeal for a success in missionary work.¹⁴

With those things in mind, we can confidently say that John Calvin's contribution to the work of missions has been unfolding before the world for nearly five hundred years. His doctrines of sin and grace gave clarity and meaning in an age where such was needed. It was and is the Holy Spirit who applies the truths of the Scriptures in the hearts of the elect to bring them to salvation, and then to service. The ministries of evangelism and missions are simply the natural progression of that work. We thank our Lord for the life and ministry of John Calvin, and for the countless numbers who follow him, as he has followed the Savior. 📖

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² Alexander Rattray Hay, *The New Testament Order for Church and Missionary*, 257.

³ John Aberly, *An Outline of Missions*, 37.

⁴ See the summary of this period in Morris McDonald, *A Brief Survey of Missions*, 32.

⁵ Charles Washington Baird, *History of the Huguenot Emigration to America*, 36.

⁶ Joel R. Beeke, www.hnrc.org/files/CalvinTeacherOfEvangelism.pdf, 77-78.

⁷ Frank A. James III, http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/frank_james_2001_calvin_the_evangelist.pdf, 1-2.

⁸ Errol Hulse, <http://www.reformed-theology.org/html/issue04/calvin.htm>.

⁹ See Scott J. Simmons, *John Calvin and Missions: A Historical Study*.

¹⁰ <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/ipb-e/epl-01/calhb-13.txt>.

¹¹ http://www.the-highway.com/Call_to_Witness.html.

¹² http://www.the-highway.com/Salvation_of_All.html.

¹³ <http://www.corkfpc.com/soulwinnercalvinsaid.html>; *Calvin's Sermons on Acts 1-7*, BOT, 325.

¹⁴ B. B. Warfield, "Calvinism," *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. by John E. Meeter (reprinted; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973), 2:447.

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CALVIN AND WORSHIP

John T. Dyck¹

INTRODUCTION

Many people, even many Christians, are surprised to hear John Calvin referred to as a man of warmth and devotion. The caricature of him as a hard and stern authoritarian appears to be quite common, but is unknown to those who are familiar with his work. While he stood firmly and without compromise on the doctrines found in God's Word, he found in those doctrines the character and true knowledge of the God that he loved and adored. The more he learned about God from his Word, the more he loved him. This heartfelt devotion is evident in all his writings, from the *Institutes* to his commentaries.

B. B. Warfield referred to John Calvin as "pre-eminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit"² because of Calvin's emphasis on the work of the Spirit as foundational to saving faith in believers. As a corollary to that statement we might also refer to Calvin as the "Theologian of Worship," even though he did not write very much specifically about worship. He understood that faith in Christ began with a change of heart which necessarily led to worship and devotion.

Calvin believed very strongly that it is not nearly enough to simply acknowledge that God exists and to perform ceremonies for him. Very early in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin says:

Moreover, although our mind cannot apprehend God without rendering some honor to him, it will not suffice simply to hold that there is One whom all ought to honor and adore, unless

we are also persuaded that he is the fountain of every good, and that we must seek nothing elsewhere than in him.³

Piety is essential to worship, and he goes on to define piety:

I call “piety” that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.⁴

This last statement is reflected in the motto that is often identified with him: *My heart I give thee, Lord, promptly and sincerely.*

Reverent piety leads to worship: “Here indeed is pure and real religion: faith so joined with an earnest fear of God that this fear also embraces willing reverence, and carries with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed in the law.”⁵

REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

Prescribed in the law? Doesn’t that make worship legalistic and formalistic? Although that danger is always present in the worship of true believers, there are really only two alternatives to worship: (1) man tells God how he would like to worship him, or (2) God tells man how he wants to be worshiped. Just as God must reveal to man how he must be saved, he also clearly tells man how to worship him. Calvin says:

Moreover, the rule which distinguishes between pure and vitiated worship is of universal application, in order that we may not adopt any device which seems fit to ourselves, but look to the injunction of Him who alone is entitled to prescribe. Therefore, if we would have Him to approve our worship, this rule, which he everywhere enforces with the utmost strictness, must be carefully observed.”⁶

Commonly referred to as the Regulative Principle of Worship, this doctrine arises out of instruction from the second commandment, and states that God must be worshiped in the way that he prescribes; man has no liberty to add his own ideas or elements into the worship of the true and living God.

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Although this principle may appear excessively strict to those who are used to modern day “worship” with its emphasis on “relevance” and the use of

“worship teams,” it is essential to understand Calvin’s earnest desire for the reverence of God’s holiness and majesty. True worship does not result from mindlessly (and often endlessly) repeating words about God’s majesty, but it is present when we honour and love what we know about the majesty of that God.

Calvin gives two reasons for maintaining the regulative principle of worship: the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness of man:

First, it tends greatly to establish His authority that we do not follow our own pleasures but depend entirely on his sovereignty; and, secondly, such is our folly, that when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray. And then when once we have turned aside from the right path, there is no end to our wanderings, until we get buried under a multitude of superstitions.⁷

Because our fallen human nature is quick to define religion merely as an outward observance, he goes on to say:

And we ought to note this fact even more diligently: all men have a vague general veneration for God, but very few really reverence him; and wherever there is great ostentation in ceremonies, sincerity of heart is rare indeed.⁸

This is one of the great concerns of Calvin and must continue to be a concern today: the mere performing or acting out of worship is not acceptable; rather, the Lord seeks heartfelt biblical worship in Spirit and in truth. This is what the Lord Jesus specifically said when he taught the woman at the well that true worshipers “shall worship the Father in spirit and in

truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him” (John 4:23). Jesus also declared: “But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt 15:9).

This view of worship was just as unpopular in Calvin’s day as it is today. An emphasis on what God requires of man is a recurring theme in Calvin’s writings as a corollary to the doctrine of man’s total depravity. To declare that man must submit to God’s requirements brings strong opposition. It certainly brought Calvin into sharp conflict, not only with the Catholics, but also with the Lutherans and others who held to the normative principle of worship; they taught that whatever is not forbidden in the Scriptures is permitted in worship, as long as it promotes the peace and unity of the Church. This normative approach to worship continues to prevail to this day, its proponents ignorant of the irony that, in spite of an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and “felt needs” as well as the frequent use of biblical words, they are still looking inwardly, to man, for the basis of their worship. Worship that begins with man will end with man; it will always have a foundation of sand. In a sense, Calvin also looked inward—but when he did so, he saw a wicked, rebellious heart that needed to be changed. When that heart was regenerated by the Holy Spirit, it looked heavenward and desired to please a holy and gracious God. This certainly supports Warfield’s statement that John Calvin was “pre-eminently the theologian of the Holy Spirit.”

WORSHIP DEFINED

For Calvin, worship begins with a sound understanding of who God is. The chief foundation of worship, he writes,

“is to acknowledge Him to be, as He is, the only source of all virtue, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, power, goodness, mercy, life, and salvation.”⁹ The more we know about God, the more cause we have to love and worship him. When we thus know him to be self-existent and self-sufficient, we will “ascribe and render to Him the glory of all that is good, to seek all things in Him alone, and in every want have recourse to Him alone.”¹⁰ This, he says, inevitably leads to prayer, praise, and thanksgiving as “attestations to the glory which we attribute to Him.”¹¹ This further grows into “adoration, by which we manifest for him the reverence due to his greatness and excellency.”¹²

This normative approach to worship continues to prevail to this day, its proponents ignorant of the irony that, in spite of an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and “felt needs” as well as the frequent use of biblical words, they are still looking inwardly, to man, for the basis of their worship.

After the heart is turned to God in knowledge and consequently tuned to worship, then, and only then, do we find place for ceremonies, which are “subservient, as helps or instruments, in order that, in the performance of divine worship, the body may be exercised at the same time with the soul.”¹³ This exercising of the soul results, says Calvin, in

“self-abasement, when, renouncing the world and the flesh, we are transformed in the renewing of our mind, and living no longer to ourselves, submit to be ruled and actuated by Him.”¹⁴ This self-abasement leads to gospel obedience and submission to God’s will.

LITURGY

When Calvin tried to introduce reforms to worship, especially with respect to church discipline, he was banished from Geneva in 1538 at the age of twenty-nine years. He was subsequently invited to pastor the church in Strasbourg. He arrived to find Martin Bucer had already been involved in the reformation of worship for a few years and he soon became a mentor to Calvin. Bucer made sharp distinctions between the complex Mass (which had been adhered to for generations with all its innovations), and the simple worship service he found prescribed in the Scriptures.

In worship, if only the inclinations of heart are followed, assuming the leading of the Holy Spirit, the result will be confusion; but when the objective standard of God’s Word is used, all things are done decently and in order. This led Calvin to prescribe a liturgy for worship which brought orderliness to the worship of an orderly God. At the same time, his disdain for ceremonies was powerful and it would be the greatest insult to John Calvin to have a liturgy aimed at spiritual worship turned into ceremony. Liturgy must be merely a means to worship, and not worship itself.

Not all the reformers were agreed concerning the details of how worship should be organized. While Ulrich Zwingli had banned congregational singing in Switzerland, Bucer encouraged it by having

everyone sing Psalms and hymns. He also simplified the Lord's Table from all the complexities of the Mass, and advocated a weekly observance of the sacrament. Calvin, as a student of Bucer, appears to be quite influenced by the reforms he had proposed, as he instituted many of them into the worship service of the church he pastored. The liturgy used in Strasbourg was very similar to the one that Calvin later introduced in Geneva.

Calvin gave the following summary and defence of his order of service:

We begin with confession of our sins, adding verses from the Law and the Gospel [i.e. words of absolution],... and after we are assured that, as Jesus Christ has righteousness and life in Himself, and that, as He lives for the sake of the Father, we are justified in Him and live in the new life through the same Jesus Christ, ... we continue with psalms, hymns of praise, the reading of the Gospel, the confession of our faith [i.e., the Apostles' Creed], and the holy oblations and offerings. ... And, ... quickened and stirred by

Calvin: Strasbourg, 1540

Scripture Sentence: Psalm 124:8
 Confession of sins
 Scriptural words of pardon
 Absolution
 Metrical Decalogue sung with *Kyrie eleison* (Gr.) after each Law
 Collect for Illumination
 Lection
 Sermon
Liturgy of the Upper Room
 Collection of alms
 Intercessions
 Lord's Prayer in long paraphrase
 Preparation of elements while
 Apostles' Creed sung
 Consecration Prayer
 Words of Institution
 Exhortation

Fraction
 Delivery
 Communion, while psalm sung

Post-communion collect
Nunc dimittis in metre
 Aaronic Blessing

Calvin: Geneva, 1542

Scripture Sentence: Psalm 124:8
 Confession of sins
 Prayer for pardon

Collect for Illumination
 Lection
 Sermon
Liturgy of the Upper Room
 Collection of alms
 Intercessions
 Lord's Prayer in long paraphrase
 Preparation of elements while
 Apostles' Creed sung

Words of Institution
 Exhortation
 Consecration Prayer
 Fraction
 Delivery
 Communion, while psalm or
 Scriptures read
 Post-communion collect

Aaronic Blessing

the reading and preaching of the Gospel and the confession of our faith, ... it follows that we must pray for the salvation of all men, for the life of Christ should be greatly enkindled within us. Now, the life of Christ consists in this, namely, to seek and to save that which is lost; fittingly, then, we pray for all men. And, because we receive Jesus Christ truly in this Sacrament, ... we worship Him in spirit and in truth; and receive the Eucharist with great reverence, concluding the whole mystery with praise and thanksgiving. This, therefore, is the whole order and reason for its administration in this manner; and it agrees also with the administration in the ancient Church of the Apostles, martyrs, and holy Fathers.¹⁵

Calvin's liturgy changed somewhat between the time he left Geneva for Strasbourg and the time he returned again to Geneva. The two are compared in table form on the previous page.¹⁶

DIFFERENCES AND CONCESSIONS

When Calvin returned to Geneva the differences he previously had with the Genevan Council had not disappeared, although both sides were willing to work together and to come to an agreement regarding worship. We might infer that the Strasbourg liturgy more closely reflects Calvin's preferences.

While Calvin preferred weekly communion, he proposed a monthly observance in Geneva. The Council objected and decreed that it should be set forth quarterly. The items referring to the Lord's Supper in the liturgy outlined above would be omitted for most of the Lord's Day services.¹⁷

Another of the elements that was quite controversial in Geneva was that of Absolution. The form he used began with reciting 1 Tim 1:15 ("This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus is come into the world to save sinners") then stating,

Let each make confession in his heart with St. Paul in truth [‘that I am the chief’ in some editions], and believe in Christ. So in His Name do I pronounce forgiveness unto you of all your sins, and I declare you to be loosed of them in earth so that ye may be loosed of them also in heaven and in all eternity. Amen.¹⁸

He speaks of this practice in the *Institutes*:

For when the whole church stands, as it were, before God's judgment seat, confesses itself guilty, and has its sole refuge in God's mercy, it is no common or light solace to have present there the ambassador of Christ, armed with the mandate of reconciliation, by whom it hears proclaimed its absolution [cf. 2 Cor 5:20].¹⁹

Calvin had pronounced this absolution clearly as part of the Strasbourg liturgy, but when he came to Geneva this practice was met with hostility, the people "jumping up before the end of Confession to forestall Absolution. Thus he yielded to their scruples."²⁰

Musically, John Calvin made extensive use of the Psalms in worship. He made his own metrical versifications of a number of Psalms, but abandoned that work in favor of the translations of Clement Marot. In addition to the Psalms, his liturgy included a metrical version of the

Ten Commandments sung before the Lord's Supper, with the *Kurie eleison* sung after each law. He also included the singing of the Apostles' Creed.

Calvin, as a student of Bucer, appears to be quite influenced by the reforms he had proposed, as he instituted many of them into the worship service of the church he pastored. The liturgy used in Strasbourg was very similar to the one that Calvin later introduced in Geneva.

Although each of the elements served an important function in worship, the focus of the service was always Christ and the preaching of the Word. This emphasis does not appear so explicitly in the writings of Calvin as it does in his own practice, and the practice of all the Reformers in general.


One of the benefits that Calvin received in Geneva was the appointment of a stenographer to record his sermons. As Calvin worked his way slowly and systematically through one book of the Bible at a time, he produced "123 sermons on Genesis, 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 159 sermons on Job, 176 sermons on 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 43 sermons on Galatians."²¹ His preaching was always clear so that it could be understood by everyone. At the same time it contained

much more in the way of Scripture verses and allusions than of illustrations and anecdotes. Preaching was the way in which the doctrinal emphases of the day were communicated to the Lord's people so that they understood the gospel and were encouraged to draw near to God. As he preached of the Trinitarian God of the Bible, he expected his hearers to worship that God.

CONCLUSION

Are structure and liturgy impediments to worship, as is often asserted? That is not the testimony of those who worshiped with Calvin:

Shall it be said that ... the true Calvinian cultus was by nature cold and impoverished? Those who were present at the services have told us that often they could not keep back the tears of their emotion and joy. Singings and prayers, adoration and edification, confession and absolution of sins, acts both formal and spontaneous: all the essential elements of worship were there. And, perhaps not less important, they were united in an organism that was very simple, yet supple and strong. Calvin is, in fact, of all the Reformers the one who most steadfastly rejected the division of worship into two parts.... The Calvinian cultus is one.²²

There are a multitude of benefits to the study of Calvin's works, one of the most important being his contribution to the reformation of worship. May the Lord bless his Church in this present age with a renewed concern for how to worship him. 

Although each of the elements served an important function in worship, the focus of the service was always Christ and the preaching of the Word. This emphasis does not appear so explicitly in the writings of Calvin as it does in his own practice, and the practice of all the Reformers in general.

¹ John T. Dyck (WRS M.Div. 1990) is pastor of the Bible Presbyterian Church in Edmonton, Alberta, and is Stated Clerk of the BPC, General Synod.

² B. B. Warfield, *Calvin as a Theologian and Calvinism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1909). <http://homepage.mac.com/shanerosenthal/reformationink/bbwcalvin1.htm>.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1:2:1.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 1:2:2.

⁶ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church," *Selected Works of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker

Book House, 1983), 128. This was written in 1544, after he had been in Strasbourg for a few years (1538-1541) and had returned to Geneva (1541).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Institutes*, 1:2:2.

⁹ "Necessity of Reforming the Church," 127.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship: Its Development and Forms* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 116.

¹⁶ Ibid., 114. *Collect* is a short prayer; *Lection* is a Scripture reading; *Fraction* and *Delivery* are the breaking of the bread and distribution thereof, respectively.

¹⁷ Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 190.

¹⁸ Maxwell, *Outline*, 103.

¹⁹ *Institutes*, 3:4:14.

²⁰ Thompson, *Liturgies*, 191.

²¹ Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 75.

²² Emile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin*, 5:504; quoted in Maxwell, *Outlines*, 119.

Thoughts or Comments on this issue of the WRS Journal?

By all means feel free to submit letters to our editor! Letters should be limited to 300 words, and either typewritten or sent electronically. See our contact information on the inside front cover. *Thank you!*

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ON TOUR

**A CALVIN PILGRIMAGE:
THE WORSHIP OF
DEAD MEN'S BONES?
Douglas Bond¹**

History is filled with ironic contortions. Consider the bungling of Scottish moderns placing a life-size bronze statue of John Knox in the ambulatory of St. Giles, Edinburgh—the very church in which Knox preached against idolatry. Or consider John Calvin decrying simony when funding for his entire education had come from benefices his father had finagled for his son.

Or consider thousands of Calvinists descending on Geneva July 10, 2009, to commemorate the 500th birthday of the man who considered the medieval sacrament of pilgrimage to be one of the “faults contravening the Reformation.” Is this yet another instance of self-contradictory theological buffoonery, a quest for merit tallied by stamps in the passport?

Tempting as these conclusions are to critics, I think not. As he lay dying, Calvin insisted that his body be buried in an unmarked grave. Some believe this was Calvin trying to avoid being the object of what he termed the “fictitious worship of dead men’s bones.” I’m inclined, however, to think that his dying request is yet another myth-buster; he didn’t want his bones enshrined because Calvin was so taken with the glory of Christ that the veneration of John Calvin never occurred to him. And for such humble piety alone Calvin would be worthy of our perennial attention.

SANCTIFICATION BY IMITATION

Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor, in whose arms Calvin died, wrote of him on the final page of his account of Calvin’s life, “Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years... I can now declare that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian character, an example which is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.”

Seventeen times in the New Testament we are told to imitate exceptional men as they seek to follow Christ. Calvin is a man worthy of imitation. There’s no idolatry in giving double honor to men who serve faithfully, who employ their considerable gifts in devoted service to Christ and his Kingdom. Hence, a tour in commemoration of the 500th birthday of John Calvin is no superstitious medieval pilgrimage.

There’s no intrinsic conferring of grace to be had by going to Geneva or, for that matter, Jerusalem. If, however, one wants to find inspiration to live a more godly, Christ-honoring life, to hone and employ skills to be more useful in the cause of the gospel, or if one desires to expand his appreciation of the sovereign working of God in history, using vacation dollars to follow Calvin around Europe for the days surrounding his 500th birthday could be time and money well invested.

For those cutting back on vacation spending, or who have already committed those dollars for a trip to Hawaii, join me in the next few paragraphs for an imaginary tour of some of the most important sights in the life of one of the

most important Christians since St. Augustine.

CALVIN IN NOYON

With a squealing of rubber, your plane touches down at Charles de Gaulle Airport. Bleary-eyed from the ten-hour flight, you pick up your rental car, check the map, and head north on the A1 motorway; if traffic is not too heavy, in fifty-seven minutes you arrive in the town of Noyon where John Calvin was born July 10, 1509. Following the signs to the Cathédrale, you arrive before Calvin's birthplace. Flattened by German artillery in World War I, and rebuilt according to original drawings in 1927, it is now the **Musée Jean Calvin**.

Entering the half-timbered house is like stepping back to the days of the Reformation. Amidst 16th century oil paintings, you see the 1534 *Placard contre la messe*, a poster against transubstantiation. My two favorites of the collection, however, are the Olivetan Bible, translated into French by Calvin's cousin, with a forward written by Calvin, and a first edition of Calvin's incomparable *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

From there you walk to Noyon's imposing cathedral of Notre Dame, rebuilt after a great fire in 1131, later repaired after bombing took its toll on the west towers during World War I. You can't help pausing to wonder at the medieval magnificence of the flying buttresses fanning out in three broad terraces on the east end of the grand structure.

Calvin's birthplace cathedral has long been a pilgrimage destination for the faithful who care to venerate the bones of St. Eloi, the 7th century goldsmith turned bishop, a coveted medieval career path. It was here that Calvin on May 21, 1521,

received his prelatical haircut by Bishop Charles Hangest. Along with his chic new tonsure, twelve-year-old Calvin was given the chaplaincy of Le Gesine and soon after the priesthood of Pont L'Eveque, a nearby village, his father's birthplace. Both of these clerical appointments carried valuable benefices which would pay for Calvin's considerable education in the years ahead.

There is much more to see in the region, including Gallo-Roman ruins, a renaissance manuscript museum, and the nearby Armistice Museum where treaties ending both world wars were signed. But on Calvin's trail, Paris beckons.

CALVIN IN PARIS

When the Bubonic Plague swept through Noyon in 1523, fourteen-year-old Calvin was hustled off to the University of Paris, the renaissance "Metropolis of Letters." Thanks to Napoleon, who wanted to rid the city of medieval houses and narrow streets, too easy for revolutionaries to barricade, much of Paris as Calvin knew it has been replaced by wide boulevards and broad promenades. Nevertheless, Calvin spent considerable time here, and there are several important sites to discover.

Check into a quaint hotel in the Latin Quarter then take the Metro to the Louvre, in Calvin's day the royal palace of Francis I, monstrous persecutor of the Reformation. Strolling east along the River Seine, you encounter St. Germain L'Auxerrois, royal chapel of Francis I. Bells from this church tower signaled the slaughter of French Calvinists, August 24, 1572, the bloody St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Walk down the Rue de Admiral de Coligny, named for Huguenot leader and Reformation martyr, and then

promenade along the embankment of the Seine, recollecting its waters running red with the blood and clogged with the bodies of Calvin's spiritual offspring, including Coligny and thousands of Huguenots. Watch closely for the narrow street called Rue Vallette in Calvin's day, where he lived with his uncle Richard while studying at the College de la Marche.

Spend a few hours in the Louvre, one of the most extensive collections of art and antiquity in the world; all the while recollect that within its walls lived Francis I, to whom Calvin eloquently appealed in his preface to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and that from the Louvre he commissioned his royal spies to search and destroy Calvin and the Reformers. Further consider that within these very walls, Francis's sister, Margaret of Valois, heard gospel preaching, wrote devotional poetry, and sang French Psalm versifications by Clement Marot, later Calvin's poet-in-residence in Geneva.

Leaving the Louvre, cross Pont Neuf onto the Île de la Cité, and stroll several blocks to the Gothic masterpiece, Notre Dame Cathédrale. Built on the ruins of a pagan Roman temple, this church has played center stage throughout French history. On its chancel, kings and emperors were coronated; later its Christian symbols were ransacked by revolutionaries who dubbed it the Temple of Reason. Through the centuries pilgrims came in hordes to venerate its purported relics, including Christ's crown of thorns.

It is unimaginable that Calvin, devoted as he was in his youth to "popery and superstition," did not enter its vast nave and marvel at its vaulted splendors; and he may have even trudged the 387 steps up the north tower to gaze out over

the city. Before the grand edifice Calvin undoubtedly witnessed the burning of "heretics," young followers of *Sola Scriptura* taught by Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples, professor at the university, preacher of sovereign grace, and early translator of the French Bible from the Vulgate.

Further down river, at what is today called the Place de la Ville, Calvin, as underground pastor, witnessed the burning of one of his own parishioners, Pointent, who died giving glory to God. Across the river at the Place Maubert, now a fashionable Left Bank market, rose the smoke of Calvin's converts. In 1557, he wrote an encouraging letter to seven who would burn September 4th at Maubert.

Young Calvin quickly was promoted to the prestigious College de Montaigu, where Erasmus had studied and where Loyola would follow him. Erasmus records that under the severity of the master of the college several gifted young men became "blind, mad, or lepers" as a result of the bad food, tedious hours, and beatings. A plaque at nearby College St. Barbe claims that Calvin studied there; either way, in the halls of the University of Paris Calvin distinguished himself and honed his intellectual skills, ones he would so ably use for the glory of Christ in his future ministry.

There is a great deal more to experience in Paris, the tombs of Voltaire and Napoleon, the Eiffel Tower, the Arch of Triumph, crepes and concerts, museums and more. Calvin was eventually forced to flee the city because men like Noel Beda, doctor of the university, were determined to "banish from France this hateful doctrine of grace."

In 1528, Calvin's father ordered him to leave Paris and take up the study of law at Orleans, and from there to Bourges, where there is a breath-taking Gothic cathedral. Here Calvin likely experienced his "sudden conversion." Under the spiritual influence of his cousin Olivetan, and his Greek professor Wolmar, the prime motive of Calvin's existence came to be, "zeal to illustrate the glory of God."

Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, in whose arms Calvin died, wrote of him on the final page of his account of Calvin's life, "Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years... I can now declare that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian character, an example which is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate."

After the death of his father in 1533 Calvin, now conscience-stricken at abuses like simony, forfeited the income from his benefices and returned penniless to Paris. As guest of a hospitable Christian merchant at the House of the Pelican, on the Rue St. Martin, Calvin may have begun work on the *Institutes*. After contributing to a convocation address at the university, wherein his friend Nicholas Cop publicly declared Reformation truth, Calvin was a hunted man. Disguised as a vintner, Calvin fled Paris, spending

the next several years on the run, assuming various names, always searching for quiet places to continue his study of the Bible.

Check your map and gas up the rental car. He appears in Angouleme, where he may have written a large part of the *Institutes*, in Poitier where it is said he first served the Lord's Supper, both bread and wine, in the caves of St. Benoit, in Nerac where he met with venerable Lefevre, in Lyon where five young converts were later martyred for their faith; he appears in the court of Renee of Ferrara, godly duchess and supporter of the Reformation, and in the court of Christian queen, Margaret of Navarre.

In 1536, he appears in Basel, the "Athens of Switzerland," where he presented the completed first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "a masterpiece of apologetic literature," to the printers Thomas Platter and Balthasar Lazius. With its publication, Calvin's hopes for a quiet scholar's life vanished. He now emerges as "the Theologian of the Reformation."

Two years later, at the invitation of Martin Bucer, he would preach and minister to the French congregation in Strasbourg, where he met his wife, Idelette de Bure, widow of a convert of Calvin's, whom he termed "the excellent companion of my life."

After another stealth visit back to Paris in 1536, Calvin found his route blocked by a battle between the armies of Francis I and Charles V near Champagne; and so he took a detour, intending to stay one night in Geneva... just one night.

CALVIN IN GENEVA

Calvin was about to get boots-on-the-ground schooling in the sovereignty of God, an object lesson in the truth, “The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.” Fiery Reformer, William Farel, who had in May of 1536 triumphantly debated with the papists in Geneva, was not about to let the gifted author of the *Institutes* out of his grip.

“Do you care to heed the will of God in this matter,” Farel demanded, “or your own will? If you refuse, then I denounce unto you, in the name of God Almighty. On your rest and studies shall no blessing fall, only fearful cursing and flaming indignation.” Calvin stayed. Later he took as his personal motto, “My heart I offer thee, O Lord, promptly and sincerely,” and so he did throughout many trying years of labor for the glory of Christ’s Kingdom among the “tearing wolves” of proud, prosperous Geneva.

Much of Geneva is a bustling international city with not a few obnoxious architectural experiments, but imagine climbing the cobbled streets of the old town past the Auditoire, the medieval hall where Calvin taught refugees, equipping them to return to their countries as missionaries—and for many of them—as martyrs. Founded by Calvin, the Academy, now the University of Geneva, began in this hall.

Geneva’s cathedral, Saint-Pierre, where Calvin preached many of his 4,000 sermons, fell victim to an 18th century rookie architect who decided the west entrance needed neo-Greco-Roman columns. It tempts one to wish Switzerland had entered World War II and that the architectural monstrosity had gotten what it deserves.

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Divert your eyes and quickly enter the nave. Now make your way to the pulpit on the north side of the aisle and imagine lean Calvin in his black Geneva gown, carrying only his French Bible, reverently mounting those same steps. Imagine the thrill of listeners, hearing the life-giving Word as their pastor expounded the sacred text—wonder of wonders—in their own language.

Put yourself in the place of gospel-starved Genevans and refugees hearing Calvin teach the Word of God. Of this high calling, he wrote, “No man is fit to be a teacher in the church save only he who...submits himself... [to] be a fellow-disciple with other men.” Calvin preached doctrine but never as an end in itself. “Doctrine without zeal is either like a sword in the hand of a madman, or... else it serves for vain and wicked boasting.”

Further imagine attending a service and hearing French Psalmody echoing off the stone vaulting as it did in Calvin’s day. Imagine his music director, Louis Bourgeois, setting Calvin’s Psalm versifications to enduring melodies such as *Old Hundredth* and *Rendez a Dieu*. Consider the great debt all Christians owe to Calvin for recovering congregational singing in worship. Little wonder John Knox called Calvin’s Geneva “the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles.”

Continue down the aisle of Saint-Pierre and stand at the chancel where slight, unarmed Calvin barred sword-wielding libertine, Philibert Berthelier, from the Supper. “These arms you may lop off... my blood is yours... But you shall never force me to give holy things to the profaned and dishonor the table of my God.”

Take a day trip to charming Lausanne, winding past cliff-hanging vineyards and lakefront Chateau de Chillon. Consecrated in 1275, Lausanne's cathedral, a gem of Gothic architecture, hosted a theological debate, October 2, 1536. Though often urged by Farel, Calvin said nothing for three days. Then Catholic apologists taunted the Reformers for presumed ignorance of the early Church Fathers. Against an army of papal apologists, twenty-eight-year-old Calvin rose and delivered a lengthy defense, reciting copiously and entirely by memory from Augustine and the Church Fathers, proving that transubstantiation was a corrupt innovation. "But why do I seek proofs from men?" said Calvin. "The Scripture alone is sufficient."

When Calvin had finished, imagine one of the most eloquent defenders of Rome stand to his feet, denounce his errors, and apologize to all those he had led astray. "I defrock myself henceforth to follow Christ and his pure doctrine alone!" Revival spread throughout the city where Theodore Beza would gain ministerial experience for carrying on the work in Geneva after Calvin's death.

Back in Geneva, Calvin was banished by libertines who cared nothing for the Bible and the glory of Christ. After three delightful years in Strasbourg, where he married Idelette, "the best friend of my life," Calvin was persuaded to write a response to a letter by Cardinal Sadolet attempting to woo Geneva back to Rome. Calvin's reply was such a persuasive apology for Reformed Christianity that the Cardinal withdrew without a word. Luther said of Calvin's letter, "Here is a writing which has hands and feet. I rejoice that God raises up such men."

Geneva wanted Calvin back. "Rather would I submit to death," he wrote, "a hundred times than to that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over." Again urged by Farel, Calvin dutifully returned to Geneva, climbing his pulpit and recommencing his exposition at precisely the text he had left off three years before. In the next twenty-three years under Calvin's ministry people hungry for the freedom of the gospel flocked to the city. Known throughout Europe as a haven for women and the family, Geneva's population doubled.

After spending an hour at the Reformation Wall, built into the old wall of the city on Calvin's 400th birthday, visit the International Museum of the Reformation. The old museum occupied a musty back room half given to memorabilia of Calvin and half, absurdly, to Jean Jacques Rousseau. Arguably, that has changed. Connected by a subterranean passageway to the archaeological digs under Saint-Pierre, the award-winning museum appears to be an elaborate commemoration of Calvin. Discover first-edition books, manuscripts, and artifacts arranged to trace the history of the Reformation. Alongside Calvin's chair and other personal effects, you will experience interactive exhibits like the one on the Geneva Psalter, 1551.

When you're scratching your head at the syncretistic spin of the museum, as if the sum of Calvin's teaching was theological tolerance, remember that the building you are in sits directly on the site where the city Council of Geneva, in 1536, voted to embrace the monergistic truth of *Sola Scriptura*. It will reassure you.


Pause at Champel Hill, near the county hospital, at the expiatory monument erected on the 350th anniversary of the burning of Michael Servetus. Though anti-Trinitarian Servetus was already sought by Rome for heresy, and though Calvin pled before City Council for a lesser sentence, and though universities and monarchs all over Europe burned thousands of Protestants; nevertheless, critics are quick to vilify Calvin for the single burning of pantheist-leaning Servetus.

When Calvin had finished, imagine one of the most eloquent defenders of Rome stand to his feet, denounce his errors, and apologize to all those he had led astray. “I defrock myself henceforth to follow Christ and his pure doctrine alone!” Revival spread throughout the city where Theodore Beza would gain ministerial experience for carrying on the work in Geneva after Calvin’s death.

Only a short walk from Saint-Pierre is Calvin’s home where he died, May 27, 1564. Near death, he dictated these words, “I confess to live and die in this faith which God has given me, inasmuch as I have no other hope or refuge than his predestination upon which my entire salvation is grounded.”

Salvation is a gift, Calvin taught, that comes entirely by grace alone, so there is no grace to be gained by the “fictitious worship of dead men’s bones.” Thanks to Calvin’s humility and foresight, where his bones lay remains a mystery, making them rather difficult to worship. Theodore Beza was right about Calvin: in him “all men may see a most beautiful example of Christian character.” But, alas, most have found it easier to slander him than to imitate him.

“How comes it,” Calvin wrote in his *Commentary on Colossians*, “that we are ‘carried about with so many strange doctrines’?” A theologically shifty age must heed his answer: “Because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us.”

No one has ever gained an ounce of grace on a pilgrimage venerating dead men’s bones. But all who want to grow in grace and perceive “the excellence of Christ” would do well to imitate Calvin’s zeal for the glory of God. Christians who do will find “stronger hope and sure” and with sturdier faith will “boldly conquer and endure.” 

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