

I. John Calvin

My first exposure to Calvin were the comments of a pastor friend. "You're not a Calvinist are you? He burned Servetus. He ruled Geneva as a dictator. He was a ruthless megalomaniac."

A. A POLARIZING FIGURE.

Will Durant: "We shall always find it hard to love the man [Calvin] who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense."

Voltaire: "He was the Pope of the Protestants."

Jimmy Swaggart: "Calvin has, I believe, caused untold millions of souls to be damned..."

Erich Fromm (social psychologist): "Calvin belonged to the ranks of the greatest haters in history."

Philip Schaff: "He must be reckoned as one of the greatest and best of men whom God raised up in the history of Christianity."

Lord Morley: "To omit Calvin from the forces of Western evolution, is to read history with one eye shut."

Georgia Harkness: "Of all the figures that gave greatness to the sixteenth century, none left a more lasting heritage than Calvin."

Theologian, William Cunningham: "Calvin is the man who, next to St. Paul, has done the most good to mankind."

John Knox: "Geneva is the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles."

What is the truth about Calvin?

B. LIFE FACTS:

Like Luther, Calvin was trained as a lawyer.

He was never ordained, had no formal theological training, didn't belong to a denomination, didn't start a denomination, lived only to his mid-fifties, didn't start a seminary.

Nevertheless, his theological system has been foundational to American Baptists, Episcopalians, Dutch Reformed, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. In short, his theology has been basic to almost all Protestants except Lutherans, Methodists and those they have influenced.

Unlike Luther, he was reluctant to talk about himself. Therefore, we know nothing about his conversion from Catholicism.

Although he was a Frenchman, he spent most of his life in Swiss Geneva, a place where he did not wish to live, and with a people he wanted nothing to do.

In many ways he was the heir of Zwingli's Zurich theology.

He and his disciples planted roughly 1,000 churches in France (Huguenots).

He was extremely intelligent. He preached upwards of 18-20 sermons per month, wrote commentaries on the Bible, and constantly rewrote and expanded his *Institutes*. In addition, he maintained extensive correspondence with hundreds of pastors and political leaders.

He is best known for the "*Institutes of the Christian Religion*." (A better translation of the title would be, "Principles of the Christian Religion").

The *Institutes* was the most important summary of Protestant thought produced during the Reformation.

He was not a dictator. Just the opposite. He belonged, chaired, and submitted to, a company of pastors.

He wasn't even allowed to become a citizen of Geneva until the last five years of his life.

He didn't put Servetus to death.

At his directions, he was buried in an unmarked grave.

However, his influence was and is immense. From Calvinism flowed the scientific revolution, capitalism, and the American experiment in ordered liberty.

Every country or nation state that has adopted Calvinism has become dominant in world affairs. (Netherlands, Britain, The U.S.). Since the Reformation, no RC countries have fulfilled that role.

Calvin is best known for predestination. But although his theological system confessed predestination, as did all the Reformers, the truths around which his theology revolved were not predestination. They were the Holy Spirit, and the Incarnation.

McGrath: “Far from being a central premise of Calvin’s theological ‘system...predestination is thus an ancillary doctrine, concerned with explaining a puzzling aspect of the consequences of the proclamation of the gospel of grace...*Calvinism* places an emphasis upon this doctrine (predestination) which is largely lacking in Calvin’s thought”¹

Who was John Calvin, and how should we think of him?

C. BIOGRAPHY

1509 born in Noyon, France to a RC lawyer.

His father steered him first to the priesthood then into the law.

1523 University of Paris.

1528 Orleans to study Law

1530-32 Converted at the U. of Paris.

1531 For chronological bearing; Zwingli died, and Luther turned 49.

1535: (age 26) He published the first edition of the *Institutes*.

He was an introvert. His ambition was to be a retiring scholar.

1536: On his way to Strasbourg, France, while fleeing Paris persecution, he was detained by Guillame Farel as he passed through Geneva.

1538: Driven out of Geneva. He fled to Strasbourg, France. He boarded with Martin & Elizabeth Bucer’s in their *Inn of Righteousness*. The love and happiness in their marriage greatly impacted him.

¹ McGrath, Alister E. *A Life of John Calvin*, pg 216 (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990)

At Bucer's direction he began pastoring a church of French refugees. Because of Bucer's marriage, he made it known that he was looking for a wife. He said he wanted a woman who was "chaste, not too fussy or fastidious, economical, patient, and if it is not asking too much, will be interested in my health."

He was 29.

Before he had a bride he even reserved a wedding date, and asked Farel to officiate.

He interviewed several women. First, friends brought him a wealthy German widow. But she didn't speak French and wasn't willing to learn. Calvin was also embarrassed by her wealth.

Next friends brought him a devout Protestant French woman, but she was 15 years older than Calvin.

Calvin was ready to give up, but then a woman in his congregation came to mind, Idellete De Bure. Her Anabaptist husband, Jean, had come to Strasbourg to argue theology with John. But convinced by the strength of Calvin's arguments, Jean left the Anabaptists and became a disciple, and eventually a leader in the Strasbourg congregation. Then he died in the plague leaving a widow with two children.

Here was a woman he already knew, who was attractive and cultured. What was not to like?

Idellete was seeking a husband. She needed a father for her two children.

Farel came and performed the ceremony. Calvin was now 31. They fell deeply in love.

Calvin described her as "The faithful helper of my ministry," and my "best friend."

For the first 45 weeks of their marriage Calvin was gone 32 weeks. He owned a boarding house, and it was left to Idellete to manage it.

1539: RC Cardinal Sadoletto wrote to Geneva pleading with them to return to Catholicism. Geneva asked Calvin to respond on their behalf.

1540: Calvin published his commentary on Romans.

Based on his handling of Cardinal Sadolletto, and his previous 18 months with them, Geneva begged him to return. Calvin was reluctant. He loved Strasbourg. Geneva had been most stressful.

I would rather face death a hundred times, he said, "than return to Geneva."

But, after prayer and encouragement from his friends, he decided to visit Geneva to discuss their offer.

Geneva wined and dined him.

That September, with a heavy heart, sensing that it would be good for the Reformation, he returned to Geneva.

Slide: Reformation Wall: Calvin, Farel, Knox, & Beza

Meanwhile, Idellete delivered a son who died after only two weeks.

Three years later she delivered a daughter who died at birth.

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1542 Calvin wrote a *Treatise On Free Will*.

1549 When Idellete was 39, a third child, another son died during a premature delivery. At age 40, after only 9 years of marriage she died of TB.

Calvin was devastated. He never got over it, and he never remarried. After her death Calvin raised her two boys to maturity. He wrote his friend, Viret—

“If I did not have strong self-control you know I would not have been able to stand it this long. My grief is very heavy. My best life’s companion has been taken from me. Whenever I faced difficulties she was always willing to share with me, not only banishment and poverty, but even death itself...I do what I can to keep from being overwhelmed with grief.”

This same year, 20 years after the Marburg Colloquy, Calvin met with Zwingli’s successor, Bullinger, in Geneva and hammered out an agreement on how Christ is present in the Lord’s Supper.

1550: Ten years after Calvin’s arrival the population of Geneva had doubled by the addition of thousands of French Protestant refugees. Also, students came to sit under Calvin. (Edward VI was King of England).

Geneva was the spiritual center of the Protestant Reformation.

1553 Geneva burns Servetus at the stake.

1559 Geneva finally makes Calvin a citizen. Calvin publishes his Final Edition of the *Institutes*.

1564 Calvin died of tuberculosis.

At his insistence, he was buried in an unmarked grave.

His disciple, Theodore Beza, succeeded him. The Reformation in Geneva continued in its initial vitality for another 60-70 years under Beza and Calvin's Company of Pastors.

D. SIX OF CALVIN'S LEGACIES

1. God-Centeredness

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones' Calvinism "begins not with man and his happiness but with God and His glory...The great central and all-important truth (is) the sovereignty of God and God's glory. We must start here and everything else issues from here."²

Haykin: "The foundation of Calvin's theology rests securely on two pillars: the utter sovereignty of God over every sphere of creation and the glory of God as the end of all of his activity and works in space and time."³

Warfield: "Calvinism asks with Lutheranism, indeed, that most poignant of all questions, "what shall I do to be saved?" And answers it as Lutheranism answers it. But the great question which presses upon (Calvinism) is, How shall God be Glorified?" *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Vol. 5*, pg. 357. 58

In Arminianism God is man-centered. In Calvinism, man is God-centered.

2. The Importance of Preaching. (St. Peter's)

Little preaching before Calvin.

Expository preaching after. Several preaching lectures a week in each of the four Geneva temples/churches.

² Murray, Iain, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, Vol 2, pg 194 (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1990)

³ Michael Haykin, *Five Myths About John Calvin*, Dec 1, 2019 https://www.crossway.org/articles/5-myths-about-john-calvin/?utm_source=feedblitz&utm_medium=FeedBlitzEmail&utm_campaign=0&utm_content=5575

Calvin preached without notes.

Calvin and the pastors rotated from church to church so that the people would identify with Christ, not the pastor.

3. Dependence Upon The Holy Spirit

Calvin: “The principle work of the Spirit is faith. The principle work of faith is prayer.”

Graham Cole: “Calvin, in particular, contributed the lastingly fruitful notion of an inner witness of the Spirit in the believer to the objective Word of God...[Calvin] is rightly described by J. I. Packer as ‘*the* theologian of the Holy Spirit,’ just as Athanasius (296-373) is ‘*the* theologian of the Incarnation’ and Luther ‘of justification.’”⁴

4. Christianity & Culture

Calvinism produces an emphasis on education, the arts, music, high culture, science, capitalism, and political freedom.

McGrath: “It has been at two points only that Christianity has been able to decisively transform human culture and civilization: during the Middle Ages, through the scholastic synthesis of Thomas Aquinas, and in the early modern period, through Calvinism.”⁵

Horton: “Wherever Reformed convictions gained a foothold, there was a revival of classical learning and interest in the arts and sciences—not only among the highly educated, but even among the daily laborer, who also had more access to basic education.”⁶

5. Emphasis on Grace

Predestination means that grace is all in all. All the reformers believed in Predestination. Calvin was uniquely called to defend it. Predestination means the centrality of grace. Grace means humility.

Frank James: For Calvinists, “The wicked receive precisely what they deserve. The elect receives what they *do not deserve* [grace]. This recognition of the immense goodness of God stirs the pious soul to ‘true humility.’ **Without a proper understanding of predestination, Calvin cautioned, ‘humility is**

⁴ “Graham Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007) pg 30

⁵ McGrath, Alister E. *A Life of John Calvin*, pg 132, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1990)

⁶ Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life*, Wheaton, Crossway, 2018, Loc 5474, Kindle

torn up by the roots.” “It was both a horrible Decree and a Very Sweet Fruit,” Frank James III, *Christian History Magazine* Vol 5, #4, pg. 26

6. Missions

Calvin’s venerable company of pastors sent an army of missionaries to Italy, Germany, the Lowlands, and England, but especially France. The French Calvinists were called Huguenots.

The missionaries travelled by night over obscure roads, hid in attics by day, and established underground churches throughout Catholic France.

He even sent missionary’s to Brazil.

Timothy George: “Calvin’s theology was meant for trekkers, not for settlers, as historian Heiko Oberman put it. In the 16th century, Calvinist trekkers fanned out across Europe initiating political change as well as church reform from Holland to Hungary, from the Palatinate to Poland, from Lithuania to Scotland, England, and eventually to New England.

In its drive and passion, in its world-transforming vision, Calvinism was an international fraternity comparable only to the Society of Jesus in the era of the Reformation. It is perhaps ironic that Calvin and Ignatius Loyola studied at the same time in the same school in Paris.” Timothy George, “John Calvin: Comeback Kid,” *Christianity Today*, Sept 2009, pg 30

E. CONCLUSION:

Newton: “Once asked if he was a Calvinist, Newton plunked a lump of sugar into his tea, stirred the hot liquid, and said, “I am more of a Calvinist than anything else; but I use my Calvinism in my writing and preaching as I use this sugar. I do not give it alone, and whole; but mixed, and diluted.” Diluted— not weakened— in a holistic and permeating way. “I think these doctrines should be in a sermon like sugar in a dish of tea, which sweetens every drop, but is nowhere to be found in a lump;” they should be “tasted everywhere, though prominent nowhere.”⁷

F. RESOURCES

- *Christian History Magazine*, Volumes 5, # 4; & Volumes 120
- *A Life of John Calvin*, Alistair McGrath

⁷ J. I. Packer summing up the thought of Jonathan Edwards, J. in *The Puritan Papers*, Vol 2, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001) pg. 22-23

- *Calvin's Company of Pastors*, Scott Manetsch
- *Calvin*, Bruch Gordon
- *Calvin*, T.H.L. Parker
- *John Calvin*, Williston Walker
- *Calvin On The Christian Life*, Michael Horton
- *The Reformation*, Diarmaid MacCulloch
- *The Emergence of Liberty In The Modern World*, Kelly
- *Slaying Leviathin*, Glen Sunshine