

John Calvin: Founder of the Reformed Tradition

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Why John Calvin?

Scripture

Isaiah 51:1–2 This passage reminds us of the importance of looking to our heritage in faith.

Prayer

Eternal God, we thank you for those who have come before us and forged the path on which we now travel. We give you thanks for this time together, when we can gather around the life and thoughts of the founder of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin. We thank you for his life and work. We hear the words of Isaiah, inviting us to “Look to the rock from which you were hewn and to the quarry from which you were dug.” For all the fathers and mothers of our faith, hear, O God, our gratitude. Amen.

Introduction

Lutherans love their Martin Luther. Methodists love their Charles Wesley and John Wesley and Samuel Sebastian Wesley. For those of us in the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition, whoever heard of anyone saying, “And I love John Calvin”? The verb “love” in front of the name “John Calvin” sounds like an oxymoron.

When I wrote a proposal to have my dissertation published, and sent a copy of it to our son Jim, he wrote back and said, “The content of your dissertation sounds wonderful, Dad, but I have one question: ‘Why John Calvin?’” I was trying, in synopsis form, to lay out for Jim and his family what I was doing all those years in the library at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary while he was a child. He appreciated all the academic research that went into the dissertation, but at the end, his major question was, “Why John Calvin?”

I suspect Jim’s question is the question many if not most of us in our Presbyterian/Reformed churches have asked. In some churches in our tradition, the name of Calvin is seldom mentioned. Many people have a vague notion Calvin lived a long time ago, was rather unpleasant, and was associated with the doctrine of predestination—which is distasteful.

Others may hear the name of Calvin mentioned in church, but do not have any clear sense of what “made him tick” or what help this sixteenth-century church reformer may be able to provide for contemporary Christians in the Reformed tradition.

It is good for us to “look to the rock from which you were hewn,” as Isaiah said. One of those “rocks” was the reformer of Geneva. We look to our past to gain insight for our present and future.

I hope this brief overview of Calvin and his major theological insights will not only inspire you, but also enable you to feel renewed appreciation of the man who gave definition to the Reformed wing of the Reformation, and transformed the chronicle of Western history and thought, from Geneva, throughout Europe, and to the United States.

Misconceptions of John Calvin

Let’s face it. The dominant images we have of Calvin are from the vast stereotypes of him that have come down through centuries. The image describing Calvin as “the great dictator of Geneva” who ruled that city with a rod of iron does not invite affection. He has been understood as a religious killjoy, a sour and dour person who believed nothing good could come from depraved human life, and who loved the doctrine of predestination because it sent all those unelected people where they belong. Such stereotypes, which I believe them to be, are not exactly inviting. Together, we may come to some vastly different conclusions concerning this formative founder of the Reformed faith.

Let’s put ourselves back into his situation. In 1535 Calvin was a scholar who wanted only to go to Basel intending to devote his life to a delightfully removed and quiet study. In July 1536, he reluctantly relinquished this dream, at the “demand” of William Farel, to become the organizer of the new Reformed faith in Geneva. It must be emphasized here that for Calvin, Christianity had to do not with abstract theologizing, as so many people think, but with concrete social and political action. Calvin was to become immensely involved in the life of Geneva, a city that doubled in size in Calvin’s time due to the influx of refugees, fleeing religious persecution.

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So Calvin, perhaps trying to turn a city in turmoil into the “City of God,” required regulations for admission to the Lord’s Supper and a profession of faith approved by the town council for all citizens of Geneva. He placed government of the new church not in the hands of clergy, but in the hands of four classes of people who carried out offices in the church: pastors, doctors, elders, and deacons. They were part of a Consistory, composed of ministers and laypersons, which had the power of excommunication. Not surprisingly, many resisted this new authoritative structure. These people denounced Calvin and give us some of the negative impressions we have of Calvin. Such notorious men as Castellio, Bolsec, and the infamous Servetus, all of whom he would rather have avoided, constantly attacked him. Some in Geneva named their dogs “Calvin” as a sign of disrespect!

Most importantly, we would like to emphasize in this study not the psychological analysis of a man in Geneva in the 1530s, but the immense contribution he made to Christian thought for the Western world. As one person put it, Calvin’s “work as a Church reformer is not to be measured by the part he played in a small republic. During his ministry at Geneva his reputation and influence as an ecclesiastical statesman, as a religious controversialist, educator, and author was widespread. His theological insight, his exegetical talents, his knowledge of languages, his precision, and his clear and pithy style made him the most influential writer among the reformers.”¹ Our own Presbyterian and Reformed tradition continues to look to Calvin for insights.

An Outline of His Life

Calvin was born at Noyon, in Picardy, France, on July 10, 1509, into a strong Roman Catholic family. His father, employed by the local bishop as an administrator in the town’s cathedral, wanted his son to pursue an ecclesiastical career. As a young teenager, he went off to Paris to study at the College de Marche, later transferring to the more famous College de Montaigu for theological study, supported in part from church benefices.

In 1528, perhaps due to the new theological teachings of Martin Luther and Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples, and questions he had about his own upbringing and faith, he began the study of law at Orleans and

1. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, eds. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), s.v. “Calvin, John” (p. 223).

later at Bourges, and in 1532 published a Commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*.

In 1533, Calvin found himself in trouble in Paris where, on November 1, his friend Nicolas Cop gave the inaugural address as rector of the university, a speech that had a distinctly Lutheran flavor. Some believe that Calvin himself wrote the address. Both Cop and Calvin had to flee Paris. Calvin went to Angouleme, where he remained with his friend Louis du Tillet.

Then he broke ties with the Roman Church, having experienced what he describes as his "sudden conversion," which he elucidates in his Preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms*. We do not know the nature of what he meant by this phrase. Calvin's life had been set in a new direction.

In 1535, Calvin was on his way to Basel, where he intended to devote his life to quiet study. In July 1536, due to the "dreadful imprecations" of Farel who demanded that Calvin stay to become his coadjutor (an important word we should not forget) in organizing the church in Geneva, Calvin remained. The demands on the citizens in the establishment of this new church, and their rebellion against them, led to the expulsion of both Farel and Calvin two years later.

For the next three years, Calvin had the best time of his life, as minister of the French congregation and lecturer in the theological school in Strasbourg. Here he became a close friend of Martin Bucer, the leader of the Reformed churches in Switzerland. His stay in Strasbourg was so peaceful that when in 1541 the Council of Geneva requested that he return, he at first refused, saying, "I will not take up that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over."

Calvin did, however, return to Geneva in 1541. He presented a detailed plan for the order and governance of the church, called the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. Calvin continued his preaching at the exact text where he had stopped three years previously. He initiated a "college" which was to prepare children for "the ministry and civil government." When the Scots reformer John Knox visited Geneva in 1556, he described it as "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the apostles."

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The Writings of John Calvin

When Calvin was forced to leave France, he spent a year in Basel, where he completed and published the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536). He hoped this work would “be a key to open a way for all children of God into a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture.” This was a small work, with only six chapters. It featured a prefatory letter to Francis I, king of France, by which Calvin hoped to convince the king of the truth of Reformed teaching. This letter was included in all later editions of the work. Calvin revised and greatly enlarged the *Institutes* for an edition in 1539. He translated this into French in 1541. Calvin wanted the common people to be able to read his work. Other editions followed. The final edition, of eighty chapters, was published in Latin in 1559 and in French in 1560.

The *Institutes* is undoubtedly the most clear and systematic treatment of Reformed theology. Today, no seminary or divinity school student would be unacquainted with Calvin’s work. Here we find the themes of the total sovereignty of God, how we understand God through Holy Scripture, the inability of humankind to relate to God outside God’s free grace, and how the church and civil government figure into the total scheme of life. This work continues to set directions for our Reformed theological study, even today.

In addition to the *Institutes*, of critical importance are Calvin’s commentaries on Scripture. Early in his theological studies, he had read the homilies of the Greek father, John Chrysostom. Calvin was so impressed with them, that he determined to publish a translation of these homilies in French, of which we now have only the *Preface*. In that work Calvin writes, “The outstanding merit of our author Chrysostom is that it was his supreme concern always not to turn aside even to the slightest degree from the genuine, simple sense of Scripture, and to allow himself no liberties by twisting the plain meaning of the words.” On this foundation, Calvin determined to write commentaries on Scripture based on the “genuine simple sense of Scripture,” and in another work to elaborate theologically on the Scriptures. This became Calvin’s *Institutes*. We see that Calvin was a *biblical theologian*, and

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not a speculative or philosophical thinker, as were later “Calvinists.”² To appreciate Calvin genuinely, one should read his commentaries on the Bible as well as his *Institutes*. Since they deal with the theological message of biblical texts, Calvin’s insights are still nourishing to us today.

In addition to the *Institutes* and commentaries, we have his sermons, tracts and treatises, and letters. All these shed magnificent light on his life, times, and experience. Above all else, Calvin was a pastor, who wrote catechisms for the young and old in his “school of faith.” He promoted the congregation singing of Psalms, delighting in people singing the faith!

Spiritual Practice

Read Calvin’s commentary on a favorite portion of Scripture and see if his thoughts are helpful.

Read the hymn attributed to Calvin, “I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art” (inside back cover). See if its theology agrees with your perceptions of Calvin’s theological thought.

Questions for Reflection

Be honest. When you think of the name John Calvin, what comes to your mind?

Based on your discussions or personal thought, have you altered your thought on what it means to be a spiritual descendant of John Calvin?

2. See Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 208–218.