

Reformation Sunday 2020

Theologian for the Ages: John Calvin¹

Nearly every year since I began as pastor here in 2003, I've done a special message on the Sunday nearest to Oct 31. I have not been doing that in commemoration of Halloween. Oct 31 is important because it marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. We should think of Oct 31 as Reformation Day. On that day in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the chapel door in Wittenburg, Germany. Many people take that event as the launching point of the Reformation. On Reformation Sunday, I like to bring a message either on one of the major reformers or on one of the major principles that drove the Reformation.

Over the years, I've done messages on several of the Reformers—Luther, Zwingli, Knox, Hus, Tyndale, and Wycliffe. I've done messages on the five *solas* of the Reformation, Reformation worship, and various doctrinal emphases of the Reformation.

There's one other person who played a huge role in the Reformation and who continues to have a major influence on Protestant theology. I've *not* done a message on this individual because he remains a very controversial and divisive character, even though nearly 500 years have passed since his death. Normally, people either love this person or hate him. People have very strong opinions about this Reformer and his ideas. But people often don't know much about him or what he taught.

The person I have in mind is, of course, John Calvin, the great reformer of Geneva. No matter what your views about Calvin, you cannot deny that he, along with Martin Luther, were the central figures of the Protestant Reformation. Since Calvin played such a major role in the Reformation, we must not neglect him or his teaching.

Caution: The fact that we are looking at his life and times today doesn't imply that we endorse everything he taught or stands for. We can appreciate what is good about him and criticize or ignore what we don't believe to be true.

¹ Some of this is based on an article from Steve Lawson, "John Calvin: Theologian for the Ages." www.ligonier.org.

Before looking at Calvin, we should review what the Reformation was all about. As one writer put it—

The Protestant Reformation stands as the most far-reaching, world-changing display of God's grace since the birth and early expansion of the church. It was not a single act, nor was it led by one man. ... The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, next to the introduction of Christianity, the greatest event in history. It marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. ... The Reformation was, at its heart, a recovery of the true gospel of Jesus Christ, and this restoration had an unparalleled influence on churches, nations, and the flow of Western civilization.²

What about the church needed to be reformed? Just about every part of it. The RCC had been the reigning power in western civilization for about 1200 years in Calvin's day. But the theology of the church had strayed far from the Bible, the leadership in many cases was corrupt, and its greed and materialism were evident for all to see. The Reformation was essentially a "back to the Bible" movement, and several reformers rose up to cleanse the church of its corruption and align it more closely to the Bible.

Apart from the biblical authors themselves, Calvin stands as one of the most influential Christian leaders the world has ever seen. Luther's colleague, Philip Melancthon, revered him as the most able interpreter of Scripture in the church, and therefore labeled him simply "the theologian." And Charles Spurgeon said that Calvin "propounded truth more clearly than any other man that ever breathed, knew more of Scripture, and explained it more clearly." His influence remains strong within numerous branches of the church even today.

² Steve Lawson, "The Reformation and the Men Behind It." <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/reformation-and-men-behind-it/>

Early Life

Calvin was born in 1509, in France, some sixty miles north of Paris. His family was devoutly Catholic and fairly prosperous. At age fourteen, John entered the University of Paris, where he immersed himself in the principles of the Renaissance. A serious and remarkably scholarly young man, he graduated with a master's degree in 1528, a mere 19-year-old.

Soon after Calvin's graduation, he began studying the law because his father wanted him to become a lawyer. He learned Greek and sharpened his skills in analytical thinking and persuasive argument. But Calvin never enjoyed the law, and when his father died, he turned to the study of classical literature. His aim was to become a scholar and teacher.

Suddenly Converted

A bit later, while he was a student at the University of Orléans, Calvin encountered some of Martin Luther's writings, which were widely discussed in academic circles. As a result, Calvin was converted to Christ. He recorded a testimony of his conversion in the preface to his *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (1557):

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.

Of course, the main teaching of the Reformation was that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. The RCC had taught for centuries that salvation is by faith plus works—the sacraments. Calvin and the other reformers restored the biblical teaching that salvation is all of faith and not of works.

Because he adopted Reformation ideas, and because such ideas were both controversial and illegal, Calvin fled Paris before he could be arrested. He withdrew to the estate of a wealthy friend who owned an extensive theological library. Calvin read the Bible along with the writings of the Church Fathers, most notably Augustine. By hard work, genius, and grace, Calvin was becoming a self-taught theologian of no small stature.

In 1534, Calvin moved to Basel, Switzerland, which had become a Protestant stronghold, in order to continue his studies in peace. While there, he wrote the first edition of what would become his theological masterpiece and the single most important book written during the Reformation, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In it, he outlined the fundamentals of the Protestant faith and presented a compelling argument for the Reformed interpretation of Scripture. Amazingly, Calvin began this work at age twenty-five, only one year after his conversion. It was published when he was twenty-six.

A couple years later, Calvin moved to Strasbourg, in southwest Germany, to further his studies as a quiet scholar. On his way there, he was forced to detour to Geneva, where he intended to spend only one night. But when he entered the city, he was immediately recognized as the author of the *Institutes*, which was a best-seller by that time. Those sympathetic to the Reformation took him to meet William Farel, who had led the Protestant movement in Geneva for ten years. Geneva had recently voted to leave the Roman Catholic Church and become a Reformation city, but it needed a teacher who could explain Reformed truths to the people. Calvin didn't want to stay in Geneva. But Farel convinced him to remain there. In Calvin's words:

Farel, who burned with an extraordinary zeal to advance the gospel, immediately [did everything possible] to detain me. And after having learned that my heart was set upon devoting myself to private studies, ... he proceeded to utter [a prayer] that God would curse my retirement, and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to give assistance, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation I was so stricken with terror, that I [gave up] the journey which I had undertaken.

In other words, Farel threatened him with God's wrath if Calvin should leave Geneva when the city needed him so badly. Reluctantly, Calvin agreed to stay.

He began his ministry in Geneva as a lecturer, then as a pastor. Along with Farel, he began the task of bringing the life and practice of the church into accord with the teaching of Scripture. He reorganized the church and its worship. Among the reforms he implemented was the exercise of church discipline at the Communion table. This did not sit well with prominent Geneva citizens, many of whom were living in open sin. The crisis reached the boiling point on Easter Sunday of 1538, when Calvin refused to administer Communion to certain leading people because of their sinful behavior. The tensions grew so great that both Calvin and Farel were forced to leave Geneva.

Exile and Return

Calvin withdrew to Strasbourg, where he had intended to go two years earlier. He hoped to pursue his scholarly interests in peace. But instead, Calvin became the pastor of nearly five hundred Protestant refugees from France living in Strasbourg.

This situation gave Calvin time and freedom to write. He wrote his *Commentaries on ... Romans* and enlarged his *Institutes*, translating it into French. Also, during his time in Strasbourg, he married Idelette de Bure, a widow of an Anabaptist man, **who, with two children**, brought Calvin much happiness.

After He had spent three happy years in Strasbourg, the city fathers of Geneva asked him to return as their pastor. Initially, Calvin refused the offer. In fact, he said that he'd rather "submit to death a hundred times" than to return to Geneva. But Calvin eventually changed his mind and returned to his pastorate in Switzerland, believing it was God's calling on his life.

Calvin arrived in Geneva in the fall of 1541, after an absence of three and a half years. In his first sermon back, he resumed his exposition of Scripture **at the very same place** where he had stopped 3.5 years earlier. This was a bold statement that verse-by-verse preaching of the Word would be primary in his ministry.

Calvin's second Genevan pastorate had two periods. The first was the years of opposition (1541–1555), when he endured much resistance and difficulty. Some of most influential families of Geneva disliked Calvin and his reforms. Those living in open sin didn't appreciate Calvin's preaching against them. These years were also full of theological controversies and personal tragedies.

But the last nine years of Calvin's life were more tranquil and enjoyable. The city of Geneva worked so well under Calvin's influence that when John Knox visited there, he remarked that the city "is the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles."

Calvin sent out French-speaking pastors, whom he had trained for the gospel ministry, to other French-speaking provinces in Europe. Most went to France, where the Reformed movement grew to encompass about one-tenth of the population. Eventually, thirteen hundred Geneva-trained missionaries went to France. By 1560, more than a hundred underground churches had been planted in France by men sent out from Geneva. By 1562, there were over 2000 churches with more than 3 million members. These people became known as the Huguenots. Further, Geneva-trained missionaries planted churches in Italy, Hungary, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, and Scotland—even in Brazil. Geneva under Calvin produced many Gospel-preaching, church-planting missionaries.

Calvinists are often criticized as not engaging in evangelism and church planting. But as history shows us, Calvin and his followers reached millions of people and planted thousands of churches. So, it is simply not true that Calvinists are non-evangelistic.

A Farewell Address

Calvin worked himself beyond his body's limits. When he could not walk the couple of hundred yards to church, he was carried in a chair. When the doctor forbade him to go out in the winter air to the lecture room, he crowded the audience into his bedroom and gave lectures from there. To those who would urge him to rest, he asked, "What? Would you have the Lord find me idle when he comes?"³

His afflictions were intensified by opposition he sometimes faced. People tried to drown his voice by loud coughing while he preached; others fired guns outside the church. Men set their dogs on him. There were even anonymous threats against his life. Unfortunately, Calvin did not often respond to this opposition with much grace, patience, or good humor. One of his well-known character flaws was his rather crabby, sensitive demeanor, which didn't win him many friends or supporters.

³ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/john-calvin.html>

In early 1564, Calvin became seriously ill. He preached for the last time from the pulpit of Saint Peter's Cathedral in February of that year, and by April, it was obvious that he did not have long to live. On April 25, 1564, Calvin dictated the following words:

I render thanks to God, not only because he has had compassion on me, His poor creature, to draw me out of the abyss of idolatry in which I was plunged, in order to bring me to the light of His gospel and make me a partaker of the doctrine of salvation, of which I was altogether unworthy, and continuing His mercy He has supported me amid so many sins and short-comings, [and]... He has so far extended His mercy towards me as to make use of me and of my labour, to convey and announce the truth of His gospel.

Calvin died on May 27, 1564, in the arms of Theodore Beza, his successor at Geneva. Calvin's last words were "How long, O Lord?" With his dying breaths, he quoted the Bible he had so long preached (Pss. 79:5; 89:46). Appropriately, this humble servant was buried in a common cemetery in an unmarked grave—at his own request. To this day, no one is sure where Calvin is buried.

In 1909, the people of Geneva commissioned a monument to the great leaders of the Reformation. At the University of Geneva, which Calvin founded, stands statues of Calvin alongside Farel, Knox, and Beza. Calvin stands as the tallest among the four, although in real life, he was probably the shortest.

Unique Contributions and Influence

Calvin remains controversial particularly because of his views on predestination and election. Calvin's supreme belief was that God, not man, is sovereign. He taught that God knows the future because God has planned the future. God's plan encompasses the salvation of the saved and the damnation of the lost. His views on salvation are commonly called "Calvinism," but his theology extends far beyond the issues of salvation. His distinct brand of theology is usually called Reformed theology, and a large segment of Protestants, especially Presbyterians and Reformed believers, but also many Baptists, endorse his views, either in whole or in part.

Virtually all Evangelicals believe much of what Calvin taught. For many, his views are consistent with orthodox Christianity.

One reason Calvin's *Institutes* became very influential was that the book was translated into various European languages. While other theological works remained in Latin, Calvin's book was widely translated, and thus became well known by students of theology. Colleges and seminaries still assign the *Institutes* as required reading. It is one of the most influential handbooks of theology ever written.

Outside the church, his ideas have been credited the rise of capitalism, individualism, and democracy. In the church, he has been a major influence on leading figures such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, as well as entire movements, such as Puritanism.⁴

By the end of his life he became the leading voice in the wider Reformed world as it began to develop in Scotland, England, France, and the Netherlands.

Modern Calvinistic preachers would include Mark Dever, Ligon Duncan, Wayne Grudem, Michael Horton, Tim Keller, D. James Kennedy, John MacArthur, John Piper, Francis Schaeffer, RC Sproul, James White, and Douglas Wilson. Many thousands of American evangelical and fundamental pastors and scholars are at least somewhat Calvinistic.

Criticism

I've known people who claim that if you hold Calvinistic views, you must not be saved. I've heard others claim that if you *don't* hold Calvinistic views, you must not be saved. To this day, Calvinistic ideas are controversial and the subject of heated discussion among scholars and students of the Bible. I would suggest that if you have not read widely on the topic, it's probably best to stay out of the controversy.

⁴ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/john-calvin.html>

Besides his theology, Calvin suffers great criticism over his agreement to the execution of a heretic named Michael Servetus. During Calvin's time in Geneva, the civil authorities were enforcing the policies of the church on the whole community. A man named Servetus fled Catholic authorities and came to Geneva. Before long, he began teaching false theology and leading people astray. Calvin and others warned him to stop or to leave, but he refused. Eventually, Servetus was arrested, tried, and found guilty of teaching heresy. Calvin gave his approval of Servetus' execution, which, from our perspective, seems extremely harsh and uncalled for. All enemies of Calvin criticize him for his agreement to the execution of Servetus. And I would agree that it stands against him as a very poor decision. But in that era and in that context, it was not at all unusual to execute heretics—the RCs did it, and so did some of the reformers. So we see that Calvin was a man of his age in that regard. But it certainly was a regrettable decision, and many people criticize him for it.

Love him or hate him, you must admit that Calvin played a large role in the Reformation and continues to have a significant impact in Protestant and Evangelical Christianity today. Many people, including myself, appreciate his emphasis on God's sovereignty. He also taught that the Bible is the highest authority for the Christian life. He believed that all wisdom comes from a knowledge of God and of ourselves.

"Let us not," Calvin admonished, "take it into our heads either to seek out God anywhere else than in his Sacred Word, or to think anything about him that is not prompted by his Word, or to speak anything that is not taken from that Word."⁵ Very good advice that rings true even today.

Calvin never lost his deep conviction that, as God's creation, he was put on earth to glorify God. He deliberately avoided the limelight in order that nothing might detract from the message of God's grace in Christ. Humility and self-denial were his principal Christian virtues. He lived modestly and had few possessions. In theology, he was completely awed by the concept that sinful human beings had been "reckoned righteous" in Christ and accounted worthy to serve the holy and sovereign God of the universe. [As one historian put it,] Calvin was "the most Christian man of his time."⁶

While we take exception with some of the things Calvin taught, we would do well to recognize him as one of the most influential of the reformers. As evangelical Christians, we owe a debt of gratitude to people like John Calvin.

⁵ B.G. Armstrong, "Calvin, John," ed. J.D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, *Who's Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992), 131.

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