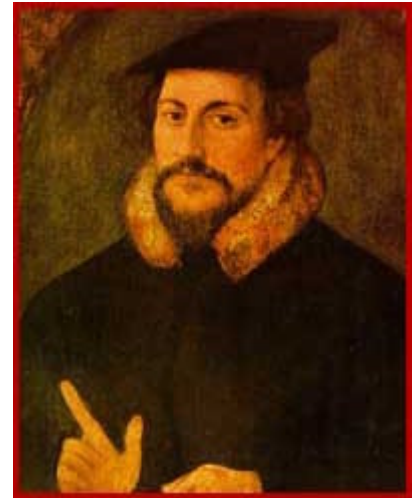


## **JOHN CALVIN (1509-1564)**

by B. G. Armstrong

French Protestant reformer; generally regarded as second in importance only to Martin Luther as a key figure in the Protestant Reformation. Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, regarded by historian Will Durant as among the world's ten most influential works, gave birth to a distinctive "Reformed" theology, sometimes named after Calvin himself.



Calvin has also been called "the organizer of Protestantism" because in his pastoral work of organizing evangelical churches in Strassburg and Geneva, he developed an adaptable model of church government. The cultural impact of that "Presbyterian" model has extended beyond church political theory. In the sixteenth century new social institutions emerged to replace the deteriorating ones that had once held medieval civilizations together; many of the new institutions were influenced by Calvin's model.

### **EARLY LIFE**

Calvin was born in northwestern France, twenty five years after the birth of Martin Luther. His actual name, Jean Cauvin, became "Calvin" years later when as a scholar he adopted the Latin form (Calvinus). His birthplace, Noyon, was an old and important center of the Roman Catholic Church in northern Europe. A bishop resided there; and the economic, political, and social life of the city revolved largely around the cathedral. From a middle-class status Calvin's father, Gerard, after serving the church in various offices including notary public, had risen to become the bishop's secretary. As a result, young Calvin was closely tied to church affairs from the beginning. He was brought up with children of the aristocracy, a background that made him a much more refined reformer than the notoriously earthy Luther.

To enable his son to advance to a position of ecclesiastical importance, Calvin's father saw to it that he received the best possible education. At age fourteen Calvin was enrolled in the University of Paris, the intellectual center of western Europe. There he eventually attended the College de Montaigu, the same institution Erasmus had attended (and hated) some thirty years earlier. Although Calvin pursued a similar career in theology, for several reasons his life took an unexpected turn. First, the new learning of the Renaissance (humanism) was waging a successful battle against scholasticism, the old Catholic theology of the late Middle Ages. Calvin encountered the new learning among the students and was powerfully attracted to it. Second, a strong movement for reform in the church, led by Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples (1455-1536), had been flourishing in Paris not far from the university. Calvin became a close friend of some of Lefevre's disciples. Third, Luther's writings and ideas had circulated in Paris for some time, causing a moderate stir; Calvin undoubtedly became familiar with them during his student years. Finally, Calvin's father had a falling-out with the church officials in Noyon, including the bishop. Thus in 1528, just as Calvin had completed his master of arts degree, his

father sent word for him to leave theology and study law. Dutifully, the son migrated to Orleans, where France's best law faculty was located.

Calvin threw himself into his law studies, winning acclaim for his mastery of the material. He often taught classes for absent professors. After about three years of study at Orleans, Bourges, and Paris he had earned a doctorate in law and his law license. Along the way he had learned Greek and had immersed himself in the classical studies, which were of great interest to the contemporary humanists. He associated closely with a group of students at odds with the teachings and practices of Roman Catholicism. When his father's death in 1531 left Calvin free to choose the career he favored, he did not hesitate. Excited and challenged by the new learning, he moved to Paris to pursue a scholarly life. Had he not been converted to Protestantism, he would have undoubtedly lived out his days in Paris as a leading Renaissance scholar.

Little is known about Calvin's conversion except that it occurred between 1532 and early 1534, when his first religious work was published. When Nicholas Cop was elected rector of the University of Paris in 1533, his rectoral address strongly advocated reform along Lutheran lines. Whether Calvin actually contributed to the address, as is often supposed, is impossible to prove. His association was close enough, however, that when the rector was accused of heresy, they both fled the city.

Calvin returned shortly afterward, but only briefly, spending the next three years traveling widely in other parts of France, in Switzerland, and in Italy. In the spring of 1534 he returned to Noyon to resign his ecclesiastical benefices (regular income the church had granted him which had supported him during his studies). No longer able to draw on that stipend with a clear conscience, Calvin burned his bridges to Roman Catholicism permanently behind him with his resignation.

When the French king, Francis 1 (reigned 1515-1547), decided that persecution was the solution to the Protestant problem, Calvin realized it was no longer safe to live in Paris or anywhere else in France. For the rest of his life, therefore, he was a refugee.

## **HIS CAREER AS REFORMER**

In Basel (Switzerland) early in 1536 Calvin published the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. When he learned that Francis 1's objections to Protestants was on the basis that they rejected all civil authority, as some Anabaptist groups in fact did, Calvin rushed the Institutes to press with a dedication and preface to the king, acknowledging the king's authority and laying out the articles of Reformed faith in clear fashion. The work, which underwent several revisions before its final exhaustive edition in 1559, was without question one of the most influential handbooks on theology ever written. Its publication marked Calvin as a leading mind of Protestantism and kept him from pursuing the quiet scholarly life he had hoped for. As he described it, "God thrust me into the fray."

Traveling to Strasburg (a free city between northern France and Germany) in 1536, Calvin stopped for the night in Geneva, a small city at the eastern end of the Alps. With the help of its Swiss neighbors, Geneva had recently declared its political independence from the Holy Roman Empire. Only two months earlier under the prodding of fiery reformer William Farel (1489-1565), it had declared

allegiance to Protestantism. Farel, who had been working in Geneva for nearly three years, somehow learned of Calvin's presence in the city and asked him to join in the task of leading the Genevan church. Calvin declined, explaining that he desired only to find a quiet refuge to study. But Farel, with characteristic zeal, thundered that Calvin's refusal to help in Geneva would bring God's condemnation down upon his head. Obviously shaken, Calvin accepted Farel's invitation as God's call. He was twenty-eight at the time. The rest of his life was given mostly to the work of reform in Geneva.

Calvin immediately set to work reorganizing the church and its worship. Under Catholicism the Genevan church had observed Communion only two or three times a year; Calvin, who favored a weekly celebration, recommended a monthly observance as an interim compromise. Calvin's emphasis on church discipline grew directly out of his high regard for the Lord's Supper. To oversee that sacrament was taken worthily Calvin instituted a church board (the Genevan Consistory) which insured that all communicants (those participating in Communion) truly belonged to the "body of Christ" and also were practicing what they professed. Calvin also introduced congregational singing into the church - "to invite the people to prayer and to praise God."

Calvin spent the following three years (1538-1541) in Strasburg, enjoying his long-sought period of peaceful study. There he associated closely with Martin Bucer (1491-1551), whose ideas, particularly on predestination, the Lord's Supper, and church organization, markedly influenced Calvin's own. In Strasburg Calvin also pastored a congregation of Protestant refugees from France, organizing its church government after what he believed to be the New Testament pattern and compiling a liturgy and popular psalm book. He also participated as a representative of Strasburg in the religious colloquies at Worms and Resensberg (both in Germany) between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals (Protestants). He succeeded, in fact, in converting to the Reformed faith at least two Anabaptist observers. One of them, Jean Stordeur of Liege, died in 1539, and Calvin, who had been urged by his colleagues to find a wife, married Strodeur's widow, Idelette de Bure. She brought him much consolation and happiness. "During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry," Calvin wrote at her death ten years later. "Truly mine is no common grief. I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life."

In the meantime, the Roman Catholic Church, mindful of Calvin and Farel's expulsion from Geneva, judged that with some diplomatic care the city might be persuaded to return to Catholicism. Early in 1539 the city council received a letter urging such a move from Cardinal Jacopo Sadoletto, an Italian archbishop with a reputation for favoring moderate reform. The council was at a loss to find anyone in Geneva sufficiently competent to respond to the letter. They forwarded it to Calvin in Strasburg, whose reply to the cardinal still stands as a brilliant explanation and justification of the Protestant Reformation.

Through a remarkable series of coincidences, the four principal Genevan leaders who had secured Calvin's exile were disgraced - all in unrelated incidents - and in 1541 the city implored him to return. The prospect horrified Calvin, who regarded Geneva as "that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over." Nevertheless, at Farel's insistence, he reluctantly returned.

The city council, now much more attentive to Calvin's proposals, approved his reforms with few emendations. He began a long, unbroken tenure as Geneva's principal pastor. Though constantly

embroiled in controversy and bitterly opposed by strong political factions, Calvin pursued his tasks of pastoring and reform with determination.

In addition to traditional areas of Christian works, such as arranging for the care of the elderly and poor, many of Calvin's reforms reached into new areas: foreign affairs, law, economics, trade, and public policy. Calvin exemplified his own emphasis that in a Christian commonwealth every aspect of culture must be brought under Christ's lordship and treated as an area of Christian stewardship. Calvin worked on the recodification of Geneva's constitution and law, mollifying the severity of many of the city's statutes and making them more humane. In addition, he helped negotiate treaties, was largely responsible for establishing the city's prosperous trade in cloth and velvet, and even proposed sanitary regulations and a sewage system that made Geneva one of the cleanest cities in Europe. Although the legal code, much of it adopted upon Calvin's recommendations, seems strict by modern standards, nonetheless it was impartially applied to small and great alike and was approved by the majority of Geneva's citizens. As a result, Geneva became a "Christian republic," which the Scottish reformer John Knox called "the most perfect school of Christ .... since the days of the apostles." Church and state served as "separate but equal" partners.

At the outset of his return to Geneva, Calvin confessed his own past impatience and severity and his intentions to correct those faults. His openness undoubtedly helped to regain for him the city's respect and admiration. When he died twenty-three years later, all Geneva turned out to honor him.

Calvin's reputation and esteem always seemed greatest among the population of Protestant refugees who flocked to the city, making Geneva the uncontested center of the Protestant movement. Missionaries fanned out from Geneva to the surrounding countries. The "Reformed Church" thus became the only Protestant group with a universal program.

## **CALVIN'S TEACHING AND INFLUENCE ON THEOLOGY**

The Huguenot scholar Joseph Scaliger in the generation after Calvin described him as "alone among the theologians." Clearly he was the greatest theologian of his age. Yet he consistently tried to make the Scriptures, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit and experience, the source of his ideas. "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."

In the past some have said that the sovereignty of God was Calvin's central teaching. Today many Calvin scholars argue that he made no attempt to reduce the biblical message to any one central idea, but rather appreciated and retained the biblical teachings in their complexity, affirming, for example, both human responsibility and God's sovereign control as well as other teachings that seem inconsistent when paired.

Calvin's system does possess unity. Behind everything he wrote is the idea suggested by Augustine of Hippo (345-430) that God created human beings for fellowship with himself. Lacking that fellowship, they are miserable and disoriented. Thus Calvin began his Institutes by stressing that all

wisdom comes from a knowledge of God and of ourselves. The God - man relationship was so basic for Calvin that he argued that in knowing God we learn of ourselves, and vice versa.

Knowledge meant much more to Calvin than intellectual exercise. Rather, theological knowledge requires a moral response by the whole human personality. The whole person, including mind and body, is engaged in the spiritual relationship. The one goal of that "knowing" experience is the worship of God in obedience and gratitude.

Calvin also emphasized that what we know about God is strictly limited to what God has revealed. He has revealed in Scripture only what is profitable for human beings to know for a covenant relationship with him. Consequently, Calvin taught that Christians should not engage primarily in theological speculation but in moral edification. Knowledge that does not lead to piety is off course. Calvin followed

his own advice in explaining the biblical doctrine of predestination, giving no priority to the rules of logic or philosophic discourse. The "why" of God's actions has not been revealed but remains a secret bound up in his inscrutable counsel. The Christian must simply affirm with the Bible that God is intimately connected with the universe and that he "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will." (Eph. 1:11, RSV)

Calvin hoped that his main contribution would be guidance for the Christian's spiritual pilgrimage. His theology was intended to be a worship aid. Yet he was also convinced that the worship of God must properly penetrate every aspect of societal life. To do that effectively the church must commit itself to a maximum use of the gifts God has given it for service in every area of life.

## **CALVIN'S TEACHING AND INFLUENCE ON EDUCATION AND GOVERNMENT**

In addition to theology, two areas in which Calvin made major contributions are education and church government. The excellence of his own educational training is attested by the fact that his writings have had a lasting effect on the French language. He is considered one of the creators of modern French prose. Perhaps more important, he encouraged the development of universal education. Calvin was convinced that for every person to be adequately equipped to "rightly divide" God's Word, he or she had to be educated in language and the humanities. To that end he founded an academy for Geneva's children, believing that all education must be fundamentally religious. The city's university grew out of the academy, linked to evangelical preaching and offering an education comparable to the finest in Europe. Some have called the University of Geneva Calvin's "crowning achievement."

Calvin's ideas on church government, which have had a powerful effect on political theory in the West, are regarded by other scholars as his greatest contribution. The representative form of government he developed was organized so that basic decisions are made at the local level, monitored through a system of ascending representative bodies, culminating in a national "general assembly" with final authority. At each level, power is shared with the laity, not controlled exclusively by the clergy or administrative officials. In emergencies the local church can function without meetings of the upper-level bodies; in the midst of a hostile culture the church cannot be destroyed by silencing the

minister. As a result, the Calvinist church was able to survive, even flourish, under adverse conditions. It experienced severe persecution in Holland under Spanish occupation, in France (except during brief periods of toleration), in England under Queen Mary, in Scotland, in Hungary, and elsewhere.

## **CALVIN AND THE HISTORIANS**

In spite of his powerful influence on European affairs, Calvin has rarely been treated sympathetically by historians. Except among his followers, he has been portrayed as a cold, unfeeling, and calculating man, who imposed his stern will on helpless or cowed people. He is seen as the proponent of an austere and joyless religion of fear and constraint, and of a vengeful and arbitrary omnipotent God who treats human beings as puppets, demanding of them servile obedience, yet severely punishing the slightest deviation from his strict moral code. Such a legalistic and negativistic religion, popularly attributed to Calvin, is a ridiculous caricature that recent scholarship has only begun to correct.

Calvin regarded himself as primarily a pastor and theologian. Spending almost all of his productive years as a refugee and a foreigner in the Genevan republic, he was accorded citizenship only five years before his death, and then only after he appeared to be dying. Because his opinions were highly regarded, his political views were influential, but he never held political office. His cultural impact was not that of an autocrat, but of a persuasive thinker who sought to apply biblical principles to every area of life.

Far from ruling as a religious despot, Calvin was continually frustrated by the Genevan city council's unwillingness to implement many of the social reforms he advocated. The city, in fact, was remarkably heterogeneous, by no means unanimously Protestant in partisanship. Before Calvin arrived, Geneva had the reputation of being one of Europe's most immoral communities; throughout his career a strong libertine and antinomian faction in the city resisted his reform efforts.

In 1553, at a point in his career when that resistance was at its keenest, events occurring in connection with a certain Michael Servetus seem to have secured for Calvin a permanent bad reputation. Throughout the intellectual centers of Europe, Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian, was infamous for his anti-Trinitarian polemics. A Catholic, he had already been condemned by the Catholic Inquisition but had escaped. When Servetus appeared in Geneva, he was recognized, arrested at Calvin's instigation, found guilty, and burned at the stake with the unanimous approval of the other Protestant Swiss cities. Despite the fact that religious toleration did not become a popular conviction until at least two hundred years later, and that what was done in Geneva was done virtually everywhere else in Europe on a much grander scale, Calvin's part in that execution has evidently served to confirm his image as an intolerant authoritarian.

Calvin was never a popular hero, even locally, nor did he act the hero's customary part. Lacking the charm of Luther's blustering Germanic confidence and humor, Calvin held an intensely serious view of life. Sensing a divine call to the work of God's kingdom, he approached his task with great zeal and expected the same of others. Few lighthearted moments or intimate glimpses of Calvin were recorded. He would not, even momentarily, set aside his deep conviction that, as God's creation, he

was put on earth to glorify God. He deliberately avoided the limelight and the sensational 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, had few possessions, lived in borrowed quarters, and stubbornly refused salary increases. 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 incomprehensibly holy and sovereign God of the universe. In contrast to the caricature, then, there is probably more truth to the conviction of the nineteenth-century French historian Joseph Renan (who was no reformed enthusiast) that Calvin was "the most Christian man of his time." B. G. Armstrong

#### **WHO'S WHO IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY**

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Wheaton, Illinois