

The Legacy of Reformer JOHN CALVIN

The exiled French Reformer, John Calvin, became the most influential man of his age and his teachings have proven to be some of the most influential in the shaping of Great Britain and the United States of America.

Some of the greatest philosophers, writers, Reformers and Christian leaders in history have described themselves as Calvinists. Some of Calvin's influential disciples include: John Knox, William the Silent, Oliver Cromwell, John Owen, John Milton, Richard Baxter, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, George Whitefield, William Carey, William Wilberforce, Sir Isaac Newton, Lord Shaftesbury, Charles Spurgeon, David Livingstone, The Covenantors in Scotland, The Huguenots of France, and the Pilgrim Fathers to New England.

The Reformation teachings of John Calvin were foundational in the development of modern Europe and North America. Calvin's concept of the separation of church and civil government – where each stand independent of each other yet recognise each others Divine authority, supporting each other within their own spheres – transformed Western Civilisation. Calvin's ideals of religious toleration, representative government, constitutionalising the monarchy, establishing the rights and liberties of citizens and the Christian Work ethic – in which secular society is seen as sacred (whereby the arts, crafts, sciences and industries are all developed for the glory of God) led to the industrial and scientific revolutions developing the most productive and prosperous societies in history.

Calvin's Reformation teachings dominated European and American history for the rest of the 16th and 17th centuries – setting the agendas and inspiring most of the greatest social reformers. The record of history is that in every fight for freedom, whether the Puritans in England, or the Dutch fighting for freedom from Catholic Spain in the Netherlands, the Calvinists were in the forefront of political and military resistance to tyranny.

It is an interesting historical observation that one of the most enduring characteristics of Calvinism was that it thrived in those countries where opposition was the greatest.

FOLLOWING LUTHER

John Calvin was a second-generation Reformer. He carefully and consciously built upon the solid foundations laid by Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli. Calvin looked to Luther as his father in the Faith, with great respect. Luther was very aware of the up-and-coming distinguished scholar and author, John Calvin, and praised his Institutes.

However, while their foundations were the same, Luther's central focus was justification by faith, whereas Calvin's focus was primarily the sovereignty of God. These Reformers shared an overwhelming sense of the majesty of God. Luther focused on the miracle of forgiveness, while Calvin went on to give the assurance of the impregnability of God's purpose. If Luther's central Biblical text was: "***the just shall live by faith,***" Calvin's was: "***Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.***"

SKILLED IN LOGIC AND LAW

John Calvin was born at Noyon, Picardy, on 10 July 1509. (He was 25 years younger than Martin Luther). Calvin entered the University of Paris at age 14, studied Law, and graduated at age 19 with a Master of Arts degree. He was described as having a brilliant writing style and a remarkable skill in logical argument. In later years, it was said that while people may not have liked what Calvin said, they could not have misunderstood what he meant!

FROM LAW TO OUTLAW

While Calvin was engaged in further studies at Orleans University he experienced what he described as a "*sudden conversion*" from papal prejudice to Protestant conviction. With this spiritual quickening, Calvin launched into preaching, teaching and counseling amongst his peers. This in turn drew the attention of the state and soon Calvin was on the run as an outlaw, living under aliases and having to move frequently to avoid arrest.

THE INSTITUTES

In Basel, Calvin produced the first edition of his Institutes. The Institutes of the Christian Religion has been described as *“the clearest, most logical and most readable exposition of Protestant doctrines that the Reformation age produced.”*

The full title of this 1536 edition of the Institutes reads: *“Basic Instruction in the Christian Religion comprising almost the whole sum of Godliness and all that it is needful to know of the doctrine of salvation. A newly published work very well worth reading by all who aspire to Godliness. The preface is to the most Christian King of France, offering to him this book as a Confession of Faith by the author, Jean Calvin of Noyon.”*

This first edition was 516 pages long – divided into 6 chapters on The Ten Commandments, The Apostle’s Creed, The Lord’s Prayer, The Sacraments (true and false) and Christian Liberty.

The Institutes was an immediate success and catapulted Calvin into international prominence. To the French Protestants no one had spoken so effectively on their behalf, and so with the publication of the Institutes, Calvin assumed a position of leadership in the Protestant cause, in the French-speaking world.

AN ACCIDENTAL DETOUR

And so it was as a respected young author that Calvin arrived in Geneva a mere 5 months later. Calvin never intended to spend more than one night in Geneva. He was heading for Strassburg, and compelled to take a deviation to avoid a local war. The Protestants in Geneva recognised him, and William Farel (the redheaded evangelist and Reformer who had won Geneva over to the Protestant Cause after a marathon debate with the papists just 2 months previously) rushed over to persuade Calvin to stay.

But Calvin had other plans, as he later observed: *“Being by nature a bit antisocial and shy, I always loved retirement and peace...”* Calvin
planned a life of seclusion, study and
“literary ease.”

CHALLENGED, CONVICTED AND CALLED

Farel would have none of this. He threatened Calvin with a curse: *“You are following only your own wishes, and I tell you, in the Name of God Almighty, that if you do not help us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you for seeking your own interests rather than His.”*

Convicted by Farel’s serious threat of imprecations, gripped by the fear of God, and ashamed by his selfish plans to avoid controversy and conflict, Calvin agreed to stay.

THE REFORMER OF GENEVA

For the next 28 years, apart from 3 years of banishment, Calvin devoted himself to evangelising, discipling, teaching and nurturing the churches in Geneva. Calvin’s dedication to duty and intense drive set the highest standards of Christian work ethic. During those two and a half decades in Geneva, Calvin lectured to theological students, preached an average of 5 sermons a week, in addition to writing commentaries on almost every book in the Bible, as well as various other theological books. His correspondence alone fills 11 volumes.

PRODUCTIVITY DESPITE ILL HEALTH

Calvin was never physically strong, and by the age of 30 he had broken his health. He would not sleep more than 4 hours a night, and even when ill, he kept four secretaries busy with his French and Latin dictation. He ate little, only one meal a day, suffered from intense migraine headaches, was frequently ill with fever, gallstones, chronic asthma and tuberculosis – yet he maintained a steady discipline of study, preaching, producing a river of theological treatises, a massive amount of correspondence and sustained constant counseling, labour in the courts and received a stream of visitors. How Calvin managed to remain so productive while suffering from such chronic bad health is one of the mysteries of history.

DISCIPLING A CITY

Calvin's goal in Geneva was a well-taught, faithful church, dedicated to honouring God by orthodox praise and obedient holiness. He prepared a Confession of Faith to be accepted by everyone who wished to be a citizen, planned an educational programme for all, and insisted on effective church discipline, including excommunication for those whose lives did not conform to Biblical standards. His was the most strenuous programme of moral discipline in the Protestant world. And quite a lot more than the City Fathers of Geneva had bargained for. In April 1538, the City Council expelled Calvin and Farel.

EXILE AND RETURN

For the next 3 years Calvin pastored a church of French refugees in the German city of Strassburg. These were the happiest years in Calvin's life. He married a widow, Idelette, was honoured by the City of Strassburg as a respected teacher of theology and was made the City's representative to important religious conferences in Germany. However, the city of Geneva urged His return. In September 1541, with great reluctance, he once again took up the burden of disciplining Geneva. Calvin succeeded in turning Geneva into a model example of a disciplined Christian community, a refuge for persecuted Protestants from all over Europe, and a center for ministerial training.

PREDESTINATION AND PERSEVERENCE OF THE SAINTS

Calvin considered Divine election to eternal life the deepest source of confidence, humility and moral power. While Calvin taught that one could not know with a certainty who were God's elect, he believed that three tests could be adequate for effective church discipline. A true Christian, John Calvin taught, could be recognised by his or her public profession of faith, active participation in church life, including participation in the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and by an upright moral life.

LAW AND GRACE

Calvin taught that though Christians were no longer condemned by the Law of God, the true Christian finds in the Law God's pattern for moral behaviour. Man is not justified by works, but

no man who is justified is without works. No one can be a true Christian without aspiring to holiness in his or her life. Calvin set justification by faith in a God centered, sanctification orientated covenantal frame.

LIFE CHANGING AND LIBERATING

This rigorous pursuit of moral righteousness, both personally and in society, was one of the primary features of Calvinism. It made character a fundamental test of genuine Christianity and explains Calvinism's dynamic, social activism. God calls His elect for His purposes. To Calvin, the consequence of Faith is strenuous effort to build God's Kingdom on earth.

FAITH AND FREEDOM

Calvin taught that no man – whether pope or king – has any claim to absolute power. Calvin encouraged the development of representative governments, and stressed the right to resist the tyranny of unbelievers. Calvinist resistance to totalitarianism and absolutism (the arbitrary abuse of power by leaders) was a key factor in the development of modern limited and constitutional governments. The Church has the obligation, under the Almighty God, to guide the secular authorities on spiritual and ethical matters. As a result, Calvinism rapidly assumed international dimensions.

HOLLAND

In Holland, Calvinism provided the rallying point for opposition to the oppression of Catholic Spain, which was occupying their country at that time.

SCOTLAND

In Scotland, Calvin's disciple, John Knox, taught that Protestants had the right and duty to resist, by force if necessary, any leader who tried to prevent their worship and mission.

ENGLAND

The Puritans in England established the supremacy of Parliament and constitutionally limited the power of the throne.

AMERICA

In North America, England's 13 colonies established the United States of America on Calvin's principles of representative government and the rule of Law, *Lex Rex*.

EVALUATING CALVIN

John Calvin stands out as one of the finest Bible scholars, one of greatest systematic theologians and one of the most profound religious thinkers in history. John Calvin was Bible centered in his teaching, God centered in his living and Christ centered in his Faith. He integrated the confessional principles of the Reformation – Scripture alone is our authority, salvation is by the grace of God alone, received by faith alone. Christ alone is the head of the Church, everything should be done for the Glory of God alone – with supreme clarity and conviction.

BIBLE BASED

The Institutes shows that Calvin was a Biblical theologian. Nothing was in the Institutes for which Scripture was not shown to support. As Calvin made clear in his Preface to the second edition, the Institutes is meant to be a general preparation for Bible study.

Calvin was a systematic theologian who interpreted Scripture with Scripture. As a second-generation Reformer he laboured consciously to confirm and conserve what those who

preceded him, Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon, Bucer and others, had established. He spoke as a mainstream spokesman for the true universal Church.

A MONUMENTAL MASTERPIECE

The final edition of the Institutes, published in 1559, contained 80 chapters and more than 1000 pages. The Institutes stands as the finest textbook of theology, apology for the Protestant Faith, manifesto for the Reformation, handbook for Catechism, weapon against heresy, and guide to Christian discipleship. It is a systematic masterpiece, which has earned itself a permanent place amongst the greatest Christian books in all of history.

THE FIRST BIBLE COMMENTARIES

In addition to writing the Institutes, John Calvin produced the first Bible commentaries. He wrote commentaries on every book in the Bible, except for Revelation. A theme that binds all of Calvin's works together is to know God and to make Him known.

TO KNOW GOD

He deals with what can be known about God (theology) and how to know God personally (devotion). Calvin's motto was *Prompte et sincere in opere Dei* (promptly and sincerely in the service of God). His emblem is of a heart aflame in the hand of God. This is what Calvin wished to be, and this, in fact, was what he was: a heart aflame for God who sought to be faithful in the service of God, renewing his mind according to the Word of God. To him it was not enough to know about God, but essential that one knew Him personally, whole-heartedly, with a heart aflame for God. Not for Calvin the dry-as-dust, cold-hearted, external and empty religion, which epitomises so many of those who claim to follow him. Calvin's faith was intense, passionate and wholehearted.

To the question: What does it mean to know God? Calvin answered: To know God is to acknowledge Him as He has revealed Himself in Scripture and through Christ – worshiping Him and giving Him thanks, humbling ourselves before Him as foolish and depraved sinners,

learning from His Word, loving God for His love in adopting and redeeming us, trusting in God's promises of pardon, glorifying what God has accomplished through Christ, living in obedience to God's Law and seeking to honour God in all our human relationships and in all connections with God's creatures.

To the question: From where comes our knowledge? Calvin answers: From the Holy Spirit, speaking in and through the written Word of God by uniting us to the Risen Christ for abundant life.

A REASON TO SING AND A MESSAGE TO GIVE

Calvin viewed music as a gift of God and encouraged congregational Psalm singing, even putting to music a number of the Psalms himself. Calvin was an evangelist who worked diligently to bring the lost to repentance and faith in Christ.

A WORLD TO WIN

Calvin's vision is attested to by the fact that during his ministry over 2 000 Reformed churches were established in France alone – with half a million church members in congregations lead by pastors and evangelists he had trained and sent out. Calvin sent missionaries throughout Europe and even as far afield as Brazil.

In his Institutes, Calvin wrote of *"the magnificence"* of Christ's reign prophesied in Daniel 2:32-35; Isaiah 11:4; Psalm 2:9 and Psalm 72 where Christ will rule the earth.

"Our doctrine must tower unvanquished above the glory and above all the might of the world, for it is not of us, but of the Living God and His Christ"

Who will

"rule from sea to sea and from the river even to the ends of the earth."

HAVE YOU READ CALVIN?

If you have never read Calvin's Institutes or benefited from his commentaries, perhaps this would be a good time to invest the time in studying these treasures.

A CALL TO SUFFER AND SERVE – CHANGING CULTURES FOR CHRIST

Calvin's concept of the Christian life as a militant pilgrimage leading safely home by a predestined path of service and suffering – as we fulfill our cultural calling – has produced some of the most humble, hard-working heroes of the Faith. Has your mind been renewed by the Word of God? Is your heart aflame with devotion to Christ? And are you applying the Lordship of Christ to all areas of life, *promptly and sincerely in the service of God?*

RESOURCES FOR REFORMATION

I trust that your church is planning a special service to mark *Reformation Sunday* (30 Oct). If you are looking for resources to teach and proclaim the message and achievements of the Reformation, do visit www.reformationsa.org

May our prayer this Reformation Day be ***“Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”***

Dr. Peter Hammond
Frontline Fellowship
P O Box 74 Newlands 7725
Cape Town South Africa
Email: admin@frontline.org.za
Website: www.frontline.org.za

Bibliography

A Life of John Calvin by Alister E. McGrath, Baker, 1990.

Biblical Christianity by John Calvin, Grace Publications Trust, 1982.

Calvin's Calvinism by John Calvin, Reformed Free Publishing Association (originally published at Geneva 1552, as *A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God*, translated into English, 1856).

Church History in Plain Language by Bruce L. Shelley, Word, 1982

Great Leaders of the Christian Church by John Woodbridge, Moody Press, 1988.

Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin, Westminster Press (originally Geneva, 1559).

John Calvin by William Wileman, Gospel Mission Press, 1981.

John Calvin – Father of Reformed Theology by Sam Wellman, Barbour, 2001.

Light for the City by Lester De Koster, Eerdmans, 2004.

This Was John Calvin by Thea Van Halsema, Baker, 1959.