

John Calvin (1509 – 1564 AD)

I. Brief Life Sketch

Around the time Martin Luther started teaching at Wittenberg, Germany, around age 25, John Calvin was born in Noyon, France in 1509. He was born to conservative Catholic parents but there are very little details known about his early years. It has been traditionally understood that at the age of 14 his father sent him to study theology at the University of Paris, with perhaps the hope of someday becoming the bishop of Noyon.¹ It does seem likely that he went off to study sometime around this period, although all that is known is that his father sent him off to keep away from the plague outbreak.



At 19, his father had a disagreement with the Cathedral Chapter at Noyon and he moved him to Orleans, where there was a superior law school. His father's conflict with the local magistrates caused him to change John's course from one of theology to one of law. He was extremely submissive to his father, so he changed his course of study even though he wanted to continue his studies in theology. We can reasonably assume that John had finished his arts degree, although there is no evidence that he had studied with the theology faculty of the University of Paris to this point.² As he completed his law course at Orleans and Bourges in three years, he mastered Greek and was heavily influenced by the thought of Duns Scotus, William Occam, and Gabriel Biel.³ His father died in 1531, and he felt liberated from his duty of studying law to pursue what had become his first love, the classics. Thus, he published a *Commentary on Seneca* in 1532.

It is between 1531 and 1533 that he was believed to have converted and encountered the Reformation. In 1533, his friend Nicholas Cop preached at the University of Paris and attacked the Paris theologians. These theologians tried to have Cop tried for heresy, so he fled Paris and Calvin went with him. Some suspect that Calvin actually wrote the sermon that Cop preached. Calvin was suddenly identified as a Reformer. But much life his early, there is very little uncertainty about what happened during these years, and what were the chief influences on him.

Between 1534 and 1536, he spent his exile in Basel, Switzerland. To redeem this time, he committed himself to learning Hebrew and published the first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536). After going back to France in 1536 to leave again once and for all, he decided to go to Strasbourg to live peacefully as a scholar. However, his route was detoured through Geneva where he was to spend a night. There

¹ Alister McGrath (*A Life of John Calvin* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990], p.22) discusses the tangible evidence and creates a bigger bed of uncertainty for this view.

² Among the most reliable conclusions regarding Calvin's early years by McGrath is that he studied arts, probably with a view to studying theology subsequent to successful graduation (ibid, p.27).

³ John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), p.122.

he was convinced by William Farel (a reformation leader in Geneva) to stay and help reform the church. Calvin became the Professor of Sacred Scripture and the Pastor of St. Peter's church.

In 1538, Calvin and Farel were banished from Geneva by the City Council because of their unwillingness to comply with the Council's wishes. Calvin went to Strasbourg where he taught New Testament and pastored 500 French refugees. During this time, he married the widowed Idelette Stordeur. In 1541, the City Council rescinded their ban on Calvin and Farel, so Calvin returned and resumed his posts. He wrote tracts, finished his *Institutes* in 1559, wrote commentaries, gave biblical lectures, and he preached on average ten sermons every two weeks. He served his church until his death in 1564 at the age of 54.

II. *The Institutes*

Calvin's monumental achievement, that still remains his legacy, is the authorship of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. As noted above, he began writing it in 1536 and it went through five expansions over the next twenty-three years. He himself dedicated it to his French countrymen who were brutally suffering for the sake of the gospel:⁴

While I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France...This was the first consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes*...It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed.

Thus, although he had sought out to have an academic life, it was not void of the urgency and consideration of the people of God. Perhaps this is the reason for such a great theological work. It is still the definitive exposition of the Reformed faith in the twenty first century. Calvin attempted to put together a whole theological system from which he understands all of life. As Geerhardus Vos has pointed out, this is probably why the Reformed faith has carried more clearly and defined than the Lutheran tradition.

Because Reformed theology took hold of the Scriptures in their deepest root idea...This root idea which served as the key to unlock the rich treasuries of the Scriptures was the preeminence of God's glory in the consideration of all that has been created...[T]he all embracing slogan of the Reformed faith is: the work of grace in the sinner is a mirror for the glory of God.⁵

Thus, since Calvin's theology had no particular doctrinal center, such as justification in Luther, but only the glory of God, it seems to offer a better life system. This is evident in his many wrestlings in the *Institutes*, particularly his pursuit to understand the

⁴ John Dillenberger, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1975), p.27

⁵ "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), p.241-42,48.

dynamics of the knowledge of God in the opening chapters. Abraham Kuyper also presented this wider understanding of the Reformed faith to Princeton University in 1898 when he did his famous “Lectures on Calvinism”. His first lecture was “Calvinism as a Life-System” where he presented Calvinism as an alternative worldview to Paganism, Islam, and Romanism.⁶

And now, by the side of and opposite to these three, Calvinism takes its stand with the fundamental thought which is equally profound. It does not seek God in the creature, as Paganism; it does not isolate God from the creature as Islamism; it posits no mediate communication between God and the creature, as does Romanism; but proclaims the exalted thought that, although standing in high majesty above the creature, God enters into immediate fellowship with the creature, as God the Holy Spirit. This is even the heart and kernel of the Calvinistic confession of predestination.

Kuyper was in agreement with Vos also that the starting point of Calvin’s theology was the chief difference between Calvin and Luther:⁷

Luther, as well as Calvin contended for a direct fellowship with God, but Luther took it up from its subjective, anthropological side, and not from its objective, cosmological side as Calvin did. Luther’s starting point was the special soteriological principle of a justifying faith; while Calvin’s extending far wider, lay in the general cosmological principle of the sovereignty of God.

So even though the staple of Calvin’s theology has traditionally been his understanding of the doctrines of grace, and predestination in particular, the *Institutes* were not dominated by such preoccupation. Not to overstate this case, it should also be said that what Calvin wrote and taught about predestination in the tradition of Augustine and Luther, has been the most influential of all teachings on the topic. For we would not have such a reference point had it not been for the Synod of Dort which formulated in the early 17th century to combat negative responses to Calvin’s teaching by the followers of Jacob Arminius, a former student of Calvin. It is from after the Synod that the acronym TULIP developed to describe the Calvinistic understanding of the doctrines of grace: T for Total Depravity, U for Unconditional Election, L for Limited Atonement, I for Irresistible Grace, and P for Perseverance of the Saints. TULIP has represented the soteriology of the Reformed faith for nearly 300 years and is synonymous with the word Calvinism.

III. Calvin the Preacher

The other legacy that helped establish Calvin as chiefly a pastor and contributed to his success as a theologian was his preaching. He was a tireless exegete and expositor of Holy Scripture. He chose to do expository preaching as his method to feed his flocks

⁶ *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931), p.21

⁷ *Lectures on Calvinism*, p.22

both in Strasbourg and Geneva. He preached through the bulk of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament with the exception of Revelation. Dillenberger has said that Calvin “assumed that his whole theological labor was the exposition of Scripture”.⁸ When one calculates the number of sermons he preached on particular books it is simply astounding: 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, 123 on Genesis, 46 on Thessalonians, 186 on Corinthians, 86 on the Pastorals, 43 on Galatians, and 48 on Ephesians. He was very much driven with a verse-by-verse exposition and almost never deviated from his style. Even when he was banished from Geneva and came back, he picked up at the next verse he had left off with 4 years prior. It is this dedication to preaching Scripture that has left behind a magisterial commentary set that is still in print and in wide circulation.

IV. Resources

Beza, Theodore. *The Life of John Calvin*. Milwaukee, OR: Back Home Industries, 1996 (1884 Edinburgh edition of the Calvin Translation Institute)

Dillenberger, John. *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1975

McGrath, Alister E. *A Life of John Calvin*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990

Parker, T.H.L. *Portrait of Calvin*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954

------. *John Calvin: A Biography*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975

Piper, John. *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000

⁸ *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, p.14

FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM

Doctrine	Explanation
Total Depravity	As a result of Adam's fall, the entire human race is affected; all humanity is dead in trespasses and sin. Man is unable to save himself.
Unconditional Election	Because man is dead in sin, he is unable to initiate response to God; therefore, in eternity past God elected certain people to salvation. Election and predestination are unconditional; they are not based on man's response.
Limited Atonement	Because God determined that certain ones should be saved as a result of God's unconditional election, He determined that Christ should die for the elect. All whom God has elected and Christ died for will be saved.
Irresistible Grace	Those whom God elected and Christ died for, God draws to Himself through irresistible grace. God makes man willing to come to Him. When God calls, man responds.
Perseverance of the Saints	The precise ones God has elected and drawn to Himself through the Holy Spirit will persevere in faith. None whom God has elected will be lost; they are eternally secure.