

CALVIN'S DISCIPLES, THEN AND NOW

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John Calvin's disciple-making through the centuries

Jesus Christ commissioned his eleven disciples in to “make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20a). Followers of the Lord Jesus have sought to do so ever since, be it in the form of evangelism, apologetic writings, or personal discipleship.

Sermons are preached, books are read, personal exhortations are heard, but one can only guess at how many people are reached and turned into disciples of King Jesus through our personal labors. Some Christians work the fields and see little in the way of visible fruit. John Calvin was blessed not only in his seeing the fruits of his labors before his death, but by having been used by God in winning disciples for Christ long after the man had been called into the presence of the Lord.

Calvin the disciple

Some might have the impression that John Calvin's life didn't truly begin until he wrote *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. While the *Institutes* was published early in his life (he was twenty-six when the first edition appeared in 1536), God in his providence was placing men in Calvin's life that would help guide and mold the man into the brilliant theologian we now know.

Calvin was a brilliant student. Initially, his father sent him to school with the desire to see his son a priest. However a change of heart led his father to believe that practicing law would be more profitable. Calvin studied law at the University of Orléans. Robert Reymond notes that “within a year Calvin so distinguished himself in the knowledge of law that he was no longer looked upon as a student and was employed to teach classes in the absence of the professor for illness.”²

Calvin studied Greek under Melchior Wolmar,³ a man with Lutheran tendencies who supplied Calvin with several of Luther's works, including *The Liberty of a Christian Man*, in which Luther laid out his case for justification to Pope Leo X.

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² Robert L. Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 28.

³ Calvin dedicated his commentary on 2 Corinthians to Wolmar.

Calvin's conversion likely took place in 1532. He left little accounting of the people, events, and circumstances that led to his second birth. In the preface of his *Commentary on the Psalms* Calvin states that he set his mind to law and that his course was altered by God's providence despite an initial desire to adhere to "superstitions of Popery."

It has been suggested that more light on Calvin's conversion is revealed in his *Reply to Sadoleto*, where he answers Jacopo Sadoleto's letter to Geneva urging them to rejoin Roman Catholicism. In that writing Calvin portrays a Catholic and Protestant layman standing before God as they are examined as to who practices the "right faith":

When, however, I had performed all [the works of satisfaction I was told to perform],... I was still far-off from true peace of conscience; for, whenever I descended into myself, or raised my mind to you, extreme terror seized me—terror which no expiations or satisfactions could cure. . . . Still, as nothing better offered, I continued the course which I had begun, when, lo, a very different form of doctrine started up, not one which led us away from the Christian profession, but one which brought it back to its fountainhead, and, as it were, clearing away the dross, restored it to its original purity. Offended by novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted; for . . . one thing in particular made me averse to those new teachers, viz., reverence for the Church. But when I opened my ears, and allowed myself to be taught, I perceived that this fear of derogating the majesty of the Church was groundless.

Aside from Wolmar, we have little in the way of identifying who those teachers were who guided a brilliant student into becoming a brilliant theologian and follower of Christ—but we can certainly be thankful that they did!

Calvin's role in the lives of his contemporaries

Ritschlian church historian Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) described John Calvin as "the man who never smiled." A superficial look at Calvin seems to suggest a withdrawn scholastic, sitting in an ivory tower writing feverishly, pausing only to pass condemnation on those below him. A recent article written in the *New York Times* by Molly Worthen gave the following one-sentence description of Calvin:

John Calvin had heretics burned at the stake and made a man who casually criticized him at a dinner party march through the streets of Geneva, kneeling at every intersection to beg forgiveness.⁴

Contrary to a popular opinion of Calvin as a sad, dour, man who executed discipline at the drop of a hat—the man was a joyful man. Benjamin B. Warfield wrote of Calvin's teachings:

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/11/magazine/11punk-t.html?pagewanted=4&_r=2&sq=who%20would%20jesus%20smack%20down?&st=cse&scp=1

[Calvin taught that] laughter is the gift of God; and he held it [to be] the right, or rather the duty of the Christian man to practice it in its due season. He is constantly joking with friends in his letters, and he eagerly joins with them in all the joys of life. “I wish I were with you for half a day,” he writes to one of them, “to laugh with you.” ... He enjoyed a joke hugely, with that open-mouthed laugh, which as one of his biographers phrases it, belonged to the men of the sixteenth century.⁵

Calvin’s jovial demeanor when combined with his gifted ability to clearly portray the doctrines of the Holy Bible resulted in his being influential to those who studied beneath him.

In 1559 Calvin founded the Geneva Academy, which would become the first Protestant “university” in the world. The Geneva Academy was an integral part of education within the Reformed church—a University of Wittenberg for the Reformed church. Calvin was the Academy’s leading theology professor and, along with Theodore Beza, taught thousands of students from all over Europe. The list of men who studied under Calvin in Geneva is notable for many contributions to the church. Guido de Bres, who wrote the Belgic Confession, studied under Calvin at the Academy. Caspar Olevianus also studied under Calvin; he, along with Zacharius Ursinus, wrote the Heidelberg Catechism.

The persecution of Protestants in England during the reign of “Bloody” Mary Tudor (1553-1558) caused many to flee to Geneva and learn with and from Calvin. Standouts in this group include Miles Coverdale, who carried on William Tyndale’s work by producing the first complete printed translation of the Holy Bible in the English language, John Foxe who authored *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, and John Knox, who brought reform to the churches and culture in Scotland upon his return from Calvin’s Geneva. The Geneva Bible,⁶ translated from Greek and Hebrew, was completed in Geneva by Anthony Gilby and William Wittingham with Calvin’s support and encouragement.

Regardless of where the students at the Geneva Academy came from, they returned to their homes carrying with them the impressions and lessons learned while studying under Calvin. Robert Reynolds notes:

Calvin’s teachings on religious freedom, in particular, laid the foundation for Reformed Presbyterianism, and his views spread from the Geneva Academy throughout Europe, and from these European countries, especially from the British Isles, Presbyterianism spread to the New World where it became very influential in the original American colonies through the Geneva Bible and in both the “Great Awakening” through the efforts of such men as Gilbert Tennent in the North and Samuel Davies in the South and the American Revolution itself through the preaching of such men as John Witherspoon (the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence), George Duffield and James Caldwell. Interestingly, when news of the American Revolution reached England, Horace Walpole rose from his seat in the British House of Commons and wryly

⁵ B. B. Warfield, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Creation,” *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 5:297.

⁶ The Geneva Bible was tremendously popular due to its marginal notes written by Calvin, Knox, Coverdale, and others. On the advice of Calvin it adopted the style of chapters being divided into verses. This was the Bible that was taken on the voyage of the *Mayflower* to America in 1620.

commented: “There is no crying about the matter. Cousin American has run off with a Presbyterian parson, and that is the end of it.”⁷

In addition to his work with the Geneva Academy Calvin preached around 4,000 sermons and continually implored the people of Geneva to be followers of Christ and godly citizens. As Calvin’s life slowly passed away he gave a plea to his fellow ministers to continue in glorifying God in all aspects of life:

Let each one consider the obligation he has, not only to the Church, but to the city, which he has promised to serve in adversity as well as prosperity, and likewise each one should continue in his vocation and not try to leave it or not practice it. For when one hides to escape duty, he will say that he has neither thought about it nor sought this or that. But one should consider the obligation he has here before God.⁸

The role of Calvin’s work after his death

In the centuries following Calvin’s death in 1564 the teaching of John Calvin, as clearly put forth in the *Institutes* has remained at the forefront of Christian learning. B. B. Warfield points to Calvin’s *Institutes* and its exposition of the Holy Scriptures as the very foundational theological treatise on which the Reformed faith rests:

[The *Institutes*] was the first serious attempt to cast into systematic form that body of truth to which the Reformed churches adhered as taught in the Holy Scriptures; and as such it met a crisis and created an epoch in the history of the Churches. In the immense upheaval of the Reformation movement, the foundations of the faith seemed to many to be broken up, and the most important questions to be set adrift; extravagances of all sorts sprang up on every side; and we can scarcely wonder that a feeling of uneasiness was abroad, and men were asking with concern for some firm standing-ground for their feet. It was Calvin’s ‘Institutes’ which, with its calm, clear, positive expositions of the evangelical faith on the irrefragable authority of the Holy Scriptures, gave stability to wavering minds, and confidence to skunking hearts, and placed upon the lips of all a brilliant apology, in the face of the calumnies of the enemies of the Reformation.

As the fundamental treatise in the development of a truly evangelical theology its mission has stretched, however, far beyond its own day. All subsequent attempts to state and defend that theology necessarily go back to it as their starting point, and its impress upon the history of evangelical thinking is ineffaceable. Even from the point of view of mere literature, it holds a position so supreme in its class that every one who would fain know the world’s best books, must make himself familiar with it. What Thucydides is among Greeks, or Gibbon among eighteenth century English historians, what Plato is among philosophers, or the *Iliad* among epics, or Shakespeare among dramatists, that Calvin’s ‘Institutes’ is among theological treatises.⁹

⁷ Reynolds, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence*, 80-81.

⁸ David Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World*, 75.

⁹ B. B. Warfield, “On the Literary History of Calvin’s ‘Institutes,’” *Works*, 5:373-374.

The original editors of Calvin's complete works said of Calvin:

Though Luther was supremely great as a man and Zwingli was second to none as a Christian citizen, and Melancthon well deserves the appellation of the most learned of teachers, Calvin may justly be called the leader and standard-bearer of theologians.

While Calvin's work has been lauded and appreciated by those who have followed the orthodox Christian teaching of Reformed theology, Calvinism itself has been looked upon unfavorably as a whole. During the Second Great Awakening, men such as Charles Grandison Finney openly rejected the doctrine of Calvinism, referring to it as "Old Divinity" and an unbiblical hindrance to evangelism. In his systematic theology Finney remarked, "I have felt greater hesitancy in forming and expressing my views upon this Perseverance of the saints, than upon almost any other question in theology."

Finney and his revivalist repudiation of the five points of Calvinism eventually gave way to the error of theological liberalism. Today Calvinism finds itself at odds with Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches that deny, among other things, God's sovereign work in election, with mainline Protestant churches which have eliminated the biblical doctrines of those who founded and raised their (now crumbling) denominations, and with the churches descended from Finney who view Calvinism as something unbiblical.

In 1997 Southern Baptist historian William Estep wrote of Calvinism: "Calvinism's God resembles Allah, the god of Islam, more than the God of grace and redeeming love revealed in Jesus Christ."¹⁰ With such opposition surrounding Calvinism, combined with the constant trials brought against Christianity by the world, one might be led to think that this doctrine, which Jonathan Edwards called "horrible"¹¹ before submitting to it and finding joy in its truth, has run its course. However, Calvin continues to speak to those living today, and his theology is being freely and widely embraced by the youth of America today.

In 1929 J. Gresham Machen gave a Baccalaureate address at Hampden-Sydney College, where he asked:

How should it be if we should turn to the Bible for help? We have turned to everything else, to things ancient and modern. Why should we not turn at length to that? I am indeed aware that the demand that I am making is very great.... I am asking you to follow him who came not to bring peace upon the earth but a sword; I am asking you to accept what the Bible itself presents as central.¹²

The evangelical church of today has been criticized for its preaching of therapeutic properties such as wealth, a positive self-image, or a better love-life—rather than the gospel of salvation.

¹⁰ William R. Estep, "Doctrines Lead to 'Dunghill,' Prof Warns," *The Founders Journal* (Summer 1997), <http://www.founders.org/journal/fj29/article1.html>.

¹¹ Quoted in George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, 41.

¹² Quoted in Stephen J. Nichols, *J. Gresham Machen's The Gospel in the Modern World and Other Short Writings*, 23.

Couple this with youth groups seeking to entertain as the world rather than teach Christ and a mass of young people are left with a spiritual thirst for Truth that is being slaked by the Reformed theology of Calvin. Journalist Collin Hansen remarks:

Many churches geared toward so-called spiritual seekers focus on God's immanence, his nearness. They talk about a personal relationship with Christ, emphasizing his friendship and reminding audiences that God made us in his image. It all makes sense, because so many baby boomers left churches that felt personal and irrelevant. But the culture has shifted. Fewer Americans now claim any church background. Evangelical mega churches, once the upstart challengers, have become the new mainstream. Teenagers who grew up with buddy Jesus in youth group don't know as much about Father God.... Calvinism puts much stock in transcendence, which draws out biblical themes such as God's holiness, glory, and majesty. Think of the prophet Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6:1: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple."... Beholding God's transcendence helps us experience his immanence or nearness.¹³

In a world dominated by post-modern thought that denies any absolute truth in favor of relativism, Calvin's theology cuts through the dulled ears of those who have been told that nothing is absolutely important and shown a God who has created mankind to glorify him and enjoy him forever—because he alone is due eternal glory and he alone can provide eternal joy.

Just as John Knox carried the Reformation from Calvin in Geneva to Scotland and ultimately the New World, Calvin's modern day disciples proclaim the reality of Ephesians 2, that we were dead in sins and made alive through Christ by grace through faith, the gift of God.

Just as men from all over Europe came to Geneva to study under Calvin and subsequently returned to their home countries to spread the Gospel through Calvinism, today's disciples of Calvin are going to his writings and theology and returning to their cultural homeland proclaiming the gospel via Calvinism, whether it be from faithful pastors preaching God's sovereignty in salvation from the pulpit or from Reformed musicians such as Curtis Allen, whose lyrics ask:

On his own, man would never choose holiness. He's incapable, so Christ chose holes in his wrist. To demonstrate his grace to save any, though, some would argue that it's faith that saves many, apart from him, like he'll just sit back, watch, and hope some believe before their heart stops; does that sound consistent with the God of the Bible, all-powerful but in salvation he's idle? If God needs help and that's really true, does that mean salvation is up to me and you? If Christ can create the earth, moon, and stars, does his work not work unless it works for us?

Calvin has remarkably made an impact on the believers of his day, and the centuries following his death up to this very day. Warfield said of Calvin and his publication of the *Institutes*,

¹³ Collin Hansen, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*, 21-22.

The publication of [the *Institutes*] was like the setting up of the King's Standard in Mediaeval Europe—that the lieges might gather to it. It was raising the banner on high that all men might see it and rally around it. It provided at last a platform for the hard beset Protestants, everywhere spoken against, and far too easily confounded with the radicals of the day—radicals who scouted the very foundations of the Christian faith, overturned the whole fabric of the social order, outraged the commonest dictates of ordinary decency. Its publication met a crisis and created an epoch. It gave a new stability to Protestantism, and set it before the world as a coherent system of reasoned truth by which men might live and for which they might gladly die.¹⁴

While Calvin's *Institutes* did fill a need in the days it was written, it is John Calvin's careful exposition of Scripture—his ability to leave us with a theology that is so intertwined and so reflective of the teachings found in Holy Scripture—that has taught and will continue to teach followers of Jesus Christ the doctrines of salvation as put forth in the entirety of the Bible.

¹⁴ Warfield, "Calvin and the Reformation" in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, edited by John E. Meeter, I. p. 403-4