

IN DEFENSE OF THE INFLUENCE OF JOHN CALVIN

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Seldom in history does a man appear on the earthly scene in an optimum time, possessed of talents of intellect and leadership that he may use to influence his own age and those to follow. Less often will such a man's influence be so completely to the good in what he teaches and exemplifies. So many influential men leave muddy tracks across the surface where they have trod, whether in teaching or living. Of John Calvin it may be said that both his doctrine and the example of his life have been beneficial to his own age and to subsequent ages.

In John Calvin, time, place, and talent were ordained by God. Indeed, regarding him it may be said, "Thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Esth 4:11). From the influence of Calvin came forth a complete theological system, numerous church denominations, Christian nations, missionary organizations, and great educational institutions.

The influence of Calvinism has issued forth like a river. As the Rhone River flows from the glacier Rhone in the mighty Swiss Alps into Lake Geneva, is purified, and flows clear blue to the Mediterranean, so we may speak of the river of Calvinism flowing from Geneva to the whole globe, more deep and pervading in some countries than others—but always bringing the highest influences from the God of truth.

However, many would dispute this analysis of Calvin's influence. His opponents and detractors are legion from both secular and religious quarters, from past and contemporary sources. What was said of Jesus, "He was despised and rejected of men" (Isa 53:3), may also, in a lesser way, be said of John Calvin. Divisions over Calvin's teachings run the gamut from adoration to sanguinary hatred. His opponents mince no words in venting their literary spleens. Most of these antagonists are equally severe in their judgments of his doctrine and his personal influence.

Among Calvin's detractors are many Roman Catholic writers. Roman Catholic leaders have hated him for joining the Reformation of Geneva and aiding the city's total break from the dominion of Rome. Calvin succeeded in solidifying the reform effort in Geneva by giving the church a systematic doctrinal foundation and being the prime mover in establishing a Christian commonwealth based on Scripture. Roman Catholic leaders resented vehemently Calvin's establishing a community based on faith rather than works and struck back in every possible manner. Philip Schaff quoted one later writer, Dr. M. S. Spaulding, archbishop of Baltimore from 1864 to 1872, who wrote of Calvin: "His reign in Geneva was truly a reign of terror. He combined the cruelty of Danton and Robespierre. . . . He was a very Nero! . . . He was a monster of impurity and iniquity. . . . He ended his life in despair, and died of a most shameful and

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disgusting disease.”² Such references are, without a doubt, beyond the pale of reality and truth. Furthermore, they ring a hollow sound coming from a clergyman of an organization that used the Inquisition to further its own cause.

Another formidable opponent of John Calvin was a group known as the Libertines, who lived in Geneva. These were men who originally sided with the early reform movement in the break from the hated Roman Catholic rulers of Geneva but reacted negatively to the rule of the gospel which the Protestant reformers implemented under Calvin and other churchmen. These citizens threatened the very existence of the reform effort and caused Calvin and the Geneva community great difficulty. Indeed, many believed that these Libertines would have given Geneva over to the French if they could have defeated Calvin—and they almost did. Schaff describes the Libertine mindset toward Calvin:

They hated him worse than the pope. They abhorred the very word “discipline.” They resorted to personal indignities and every device of intimidation; they nick-named him “Cain,” and gave his name to the dogs of the street; they insulted him on his way to the lecture-room; they fired one night fifty shots before his bedchamber; they threatened him in the pulpit; they approached the communion table to wrest the sacred elements from his hands, but he refused to profane the sacrament and overawed them.³

Such was the severity of the hatred and opposition to Calvin. Clearly, Calvin believed this opposition was against the gospel, not him personally, and treated it in that way. Some will describe Calvin’s treatment of the Libertines as extreme and unworthy of any Christian leader at any time or place. However, the age of Calvin was a time for establishing the most important movement in church history since the first century. The direction of the whole course of history was at stake in these conflicts. The movement that saw the resurrecting of the great doctrines of God’s grace was in its natal stage and required strong measures in its defense. The success of the gospel in the 16th century often required strong regulations and, when possible, the use of fortified cities or the help of benevolent kings to weather the mighty counterattacks of Satan.

As Schaff notes: “After the final collapse of the Libertine party in 1556, the peace was not seriously disturbed, and Calvin’s work progressed without interruption. The authorities of the State were as zealous for the honor of the Church and the glory of Christ as the ministers of the gospel.”⁴ This peace freed Calvin and other churchmen to concentrate on the reform efforts until his death in 1564. The victory of Calvin over such internal enemies would mean untold value for the cause of Christ through subsequent ages.

So much did the work of the Lord permeate and dominate the city-state of Geneva that John Knox called it “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.”⁵ Regardless of the success of the reformed movement in the Protestant world, certain modern writers have joined in the attacks on John Calvin both against the man, the *ad*

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1910; reprinted Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 8:520.

³ *Ibid.*, 8:496.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8:510.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:518.

hominem fallacy, and especially against the doctrines he espoused. Regarding his life, they often simply regurgitate the old accusations of detractors of the past.

What is more serious are the attacks on the doctrines which Calvin taught. One such opponent is Dave Hunt, who assails Calvinism in a recent book titled *What Love Is This?* Tim LaHaye actually declared that this “may well be the most important book written in the 21st century”—an exaggerated claim for any book, let alone this one. Hunt declares, “There is a great deal contained in Calvin’s writings which every true believer must admit was at the least, serious error and in some cases outright heresy.”⁶ Charging a man with heresy is a very serious matter. Hunt does this with blatant effrontery. The record of Calvin’s teaching is otherwise. No doubt, millions of true believers would not agree that Calvin taught serious error, let alone that he taught heresy.

Hunt levels his main attack against the so-called Five Points of Calvinism. He takes each point and attempts to show how unscriptural it is. He gives special attention to the doctrine of predestination. Hunt states, “We will examine those scriptures and in the process we will see that in the Bible predestination/election is *never* unto salvation.”⁷ Hunt is clearly in error in making this claim. Many texts of the Bible lucidly teach that election is unto salvation. One such is Eph 1:5: “Having predestinated us unto the adoption of sons by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.” Surely being adopted by God as a son relates to salvation! Doubtless, without fear of justifiable contradiction, we may state that the doctrines of Calvin are based solidly on Holy Scripture.

A believer may observe with perfect confidence that what Paul taught, especially in Romans and Galatians, is what Calvin taught, no more no less. When one argues against the doctrine of predestination, he is arguing not against John Calvin but against what the Apostle Paul clearly taught in such passages as Romans 9.

Basic to Calvin’s doctrine is its strong emphasis on the absolute sovereignty of God in every aspect of man’s relations with him. From this foundational truth flows the doctrine of predestination. Scripture is clear on this when Paul declares that the believer has been “predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Eph 1:11). This doctrine has been restated through history in the major creeds of the Reformed faith, a part of the Calvin legacy, including the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of the Synod of Dort, and the Westminster Confession of Faith; and it has blessed the hearts of millions of believers with full assurance of their salvation and a deep gratitude for God’s unmerited favor.

As a “tree is known by its fruit” (Matt 12:33) so a doctrine or a movement may be known by its effects or its results. The influences of Calvinism are a testimony to the truthfulness of the doctrinal teachings and constitute a part of the defense of John Calvin. The doctrinal river that continues to flow out of Geneva has been positive in many ways.

⁶ Dave Hunt, *What Love Is This?: Calvinism’s Misrepresentation of God* (Sisters, Ore.: Loyal, 2002), 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

Consider the Calvinist influence in Christian missions. Out of the Calvinist centers of activity and influence came forth the greatest missionary movement of church history since the first century: the 19th century worldwide effort to reach the masses with the gospel. The movement was initiated by William Carey, a confirmed Calvinist in doctrine, who went to India and motivated untold numbers of missionaries who became a part of this amazing outreach. Carey entitled his mission agency: “The Particular [Calvinistic] Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen.”⁸ In choosing this title for his agency, Carey was demonstrating the harmony that exists between the biblical points of Calvinistic doctrine and the evangelistic effort to “preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

Indeed, John Calvin was a man with a missionary mind and heart. He was in no wise indifferent to the Great Commission as some have charged. Although many beleaguered Christians fled to Geneva for refuge from Roman Catholic persecution, out of Geneva poured forth numerous missionaries to the countries of Europe, including Italy and especially Calvin’s own France. During a period of intense evangelizing in Calvin’s native land great numbers of converts embraced Calvinism, including many of the aristocracy. New evangelical churches were cropping up throughout France, and the elect were being brought to faith in Christ in great numbers.⁹ An effort was made even to send preachers to Brazil to spread the gospel. The claim that Calvinism means death to evangelism and missions cannot be sustained by the record.

John Calvin’s own life was filled with soul winning. In the 16th century most people were convinced that God exists and the Bible is God’s Word, yet they did not understand the true meaning of Scripture. During this time, much evangelism was accomplished by debating what Scripture actually taught. Who will deny that Luther’s debate with John Eck at Leipzig led to the salvation of souls?

John Calvin engaged in similar debates. One such was held in the Swiss city of Lausanne in 1536. William Farel, leader of the Genevan reform in its early days, opened the debate with a challenge to the Roman Catholic representatives: “Let Holy Scriptures alone be the judge. If the truth is on your side, step forward!”¹⁰ For three days Farel vainly attempted to get Calvin to speak. Calvin replied, “Why should I interfere?”¹¹ On the fourth day, surprisingly, Calvin rose and spoke. Though by nature of a retiring temperament, he could remain silent no longer. He gave a forceful dissertation on the spiritual nature of the Lord’s Supper in contrast to the Catholic Mass. After a time of silence, when the perspiring Calvin sat down, a Franciscan friar by the name of Jean Tandy, moved by the truth from Calvin’s lips, rose and declared:

It seems to me that the sin against the Spirit which the Scriptures speak of is the stubbornness which rebels against manifest truth. In accordance with that which I have heard, I confess to be guilty, because of ignorance I have lived in error and I have spread wrong teaching. I ask God’s pardon for everything I have said and done against His honor; and ask the pardon of all of you people for the offense which I gave with my

⁸ G. Smith, *Short History of Christian Missions* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, n.d.), 162.

⁹ A. E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (7th ed.; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), 189.

¹⁰ E. Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life*, transl. by D. G. Gelzer (2nd ed.; Richmond, Vir.: John Knox Press, 1961), 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

preaching up until now. I defrock myself henceforth to follow Christ and His pure doctrine alone.”¹²

God’s Holy Spirit used the disputation at Lausanne to turn many hearts to the rediscovered gospel of Christ. In time, two hundred priests of Rome joined the Reformation in the Canton of the Vaud. Among these were some of the strongest defenders of Rome who crossed over to the evangelical side.¹³ The missionary influence of John Calvin was the seed of an outreach that continues until the present day.

Calvin’s positive influences extended beyond the more spiritual and ecclesiastical into other significant realms, namely, government, economics, and education. Calvin’s influence on government was nothing less than revolutionary. He taught a hitherto unheard of idea, based on Scripture, that lower magistrates may, in some cases, lead a revolt against an entrenched king who denies basic liberties to his subjects. Calvin explained the concept in *Institutes of Christian Religion*:

The former class of deliverers [lower magistrates or princes] being brought forward by the lawful call of God to perform such deeds, when they took up arms against kings, did not all violate that majesty with which kings are invested by by divine appointment, but armed from heaven, they, by a greater power, curbed a less. . . . So far am I from forbidding these officially to check the undue license of kings.¹⁴

By reason of this principle, Calvin’s influence on nations extended into the future far beyond his own times. As Georgia Harkness claimed, “Calvinism gave rise to the spirit of independence, and fomented revolutions.”¹⁵ Calvin’s influence, through this principle, was a primary factor in the break for liberty which took place in America in 1775. Although most Anglicans remained faithful to King George, Calvinistic colonists no longer feared that they would be sinning against God to seek independence from the king. As George Bancroft stated, “The first public voice in America for dissolving all connections with Great Britain, came . . . from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.”¹⁶

The river of Calvinism is also found in the worlds of economics and business. Credit capitalism, which spawned the industrial revolution, came about in part from the application of economic teachings of John Calvin and his followers. R. H. Tawney writes: “In doing so they [Calvinists] naturally started from a frank recognition of the necessity of capital, credit and banking, large-scale commerce and finance, and the other practical facts of business life.”¹⁷

In early America, Scotch-Irish Presbyterian entrepreneurs led the way in business and investment enterprises. They were armed with the Calvin’s teaching that it is not contrary to God’s Word to make a profit in business. Businessmen like John Wanamaker, William Dodge,

¹² Ibid., 53.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Institutes*, 4:20:30-31.

¹⁵ G. Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (New York: Holt, 1931), 86.

¹⁶ M. A. Beliles and S. K. McDowell, *America’s Providential History* (Charlottesville, Vir.: Providence Foundation, 1996), 141.

¹⁷ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Mentor Books, 1960), 93.

Cyrus McCormick, and William Henry Belk, to name a few, were Calvinistic Christians who profited from the biblical economic principles of John Calvin. Calvin was not promoting greed but a Christian use of wealth. Knowing their accountability to God, these men and others like them commonly used their profits to further the kingdom of Christ. The great prosperity of America had a Calvinistic stamp at its beginning.

In the realm of education Calvin's influence has not been minimal. In the United States especially, men, moved and energized by Calvinistic doctrine, attempted to spread the truth of the gospel by establishing colleges and lower schools. The colleges of Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Bowdoin, Miami of Ohio, Williams, Amherst, and the University of Delaware are only some of the institutions founded by the Calvinists of America.

Calvinistic educators also made wide use of the printed page. America's children were given a sound Christian Calvinistic foundation when learning to read by using John Cotton's *New England Primer*, which included the biblical truth, "In Adam's Fall we sinned all."

Moreover, Noah Webster's *The Blue Back Speller* was used by thousands of school children. Webster's original dictionary, published in 1828, was produced with a view to advancing and preserving Christianity in America by the proper definitions of words and was on the desks of thousands of school children. Along with his theological definitions Webster defined America as a republic and certainly not a democracy. Webster despised the term democracy as a description of America's new government.

Calvinism was a prominent influence in Webster's life, as it was in that of W. Holmes McGuffey, the Presbyterian educator and author of the renowned *Eclectic Readers*. Early editions of the *Eclectic Reader* spread Bible truth and the Calvinist theistic worldview throughout the American colonies. In the introduction to the *Fourth Reader*, McGuffey stated, "In a Christian country, that man is to be pitied, who . . . can honestly object to imbuing the minds of youth with the language and spirit of the Word of God."¹⁸

John Calvin's influences have flowed far and wide, blessing men and nations wherever they have gone. The magnitude of what Calvin accomplished through his life, preaching, and writings speaks to his willingness to be used by God in an extraordinary way. Calvin's influences, as an early doctrinal reformer and missionary statesman, stretch far beyond his own time and place. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and Bible commentaries are studied today by countless individuals and in colleges, seminaries, churches, and Sunday schools. Indeed, the church of Christ has been enriched by the impact of Calvin's life and letters for nearly 450 years. It may be certainly said of him, as it was of the patriarch Abel, "He being dead yet speaketh" (Heb 11:4).

¹⁸ J. H. Westerhoff III, *McGuffey and His Readers* (Milford, Mich.: Mott Media, 1978), 61.