

CALVIN'S LATTER YEARS (1541-1564)

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John Calvin was born in Noyon, France, on July 10, 1509. In 1535, because of his close association with Nicolas Cop, rector of the University of Paris who announced for Martin Luther, Calvin fled Paris for Geneva. There he befriended Guillaume Farel, a French evangelist and founder of Reformed churches. Farel asked Calvin to remain in Geneva to assist in the city's reformation movement. Calvin stayed until 1538, when the people of Geneva voted against Farel and Calvin and asked both reformers to leave. Calvin went to Strasbourg where he met and married the widow Idelette de Bure. The couple had one child who died in infancy.

In 1541 the Genevans prevailed upon Calvin to return and to lead them again in reforming the church. He remained in Geneva for the rest of His life . . . His wife died in 1549, and he did not remarry. Although he received a house and a stipend from the government, . . . he did not become a citizen of Geneva until 1559.¹

Calvin was a provincial French lawyer, scholar, theologian, thinker, writer and ecclesiastical statesman, but he was also much, much more. Most notably, Calvin had a passion for preaching.

Preaching Schedule

George Gordon says that in Calvin's *Institutes*, "it is impossible not to feel the passion of the preacher."² Though Calvin was inclined to quiet study, his God-given preaching passion was evident throughout his public life in his demanding preaching schedule.

On Sunday he took always the New Testament, except for a few Psalms on Sunday afternoon. During the week . . . it was always the Old Testament. He took five years to complete the Book of Acts. He preached 46 sermons on Thessalonians, 186 on Corinthians, 86 on the Pastorals, 43 on Galatians, 48 on Ephesians. He spent five years on his Harmony of the Gospels. That was just his Sunday work! During the weekdays in those five years he preached 159 sermons on Job, 200 on Deuteronomy, 353 on Isaiah, and 123 on Genesis.³

Calvin's preaching schedule was burdensome indeed. When one understands Calvin's health problems, it becomes clear that Calvin was called of God. It also becomes clear that Calvin had great respect for God's call. His

health was never robust; his illnesses included chronic asthma, indigestion, and catarrh, [an inflammation of the mucous membrane]. In 1558, he became very frail with the onset of quartan fever [a type of malaria in which the paroxysms or convulsions occur every fourth day]. He died on May 27, 1564 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Geneva.⁴

Calvin could easily echo Paul in 1 Cor 9:16: “for though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.”

Reformation Writings

Calvin was a great leader of the Reformation. His abilities as thinker, scholar, writer, and preacher gave necessary impetus to the Reform movement. In fact,

Calvin . . . may well have saved Protestantism when it was at low ebb. In Germany after Luther’s death [1546], Charles V [of the Holy Roman Empire] was winning the war [against France]. While Wittenberg and the Elector of Saxony were vanquished, Calvinism was flourishing to the north and to the west.⁵

Calvinism flourished because of Calvin’s God-given, unique talents. Calvin’s *Institutes* had tremendous positive influence for Protestantism, but that positive influence was not due to the *Institutes* alone. In 1558 Calvin founded an academy to train ministers. Theodore Beza was rector of Calvin’s “college” that soon would become a university. The school would make Geneva a European center of learning as new converts, seekers, and lost souls came to Geneva to sit, to listen, and to learn. More often than not, they left Geneva as missionaries. John Knox, for example, a former galley slave on the Mediterranean, got his training at Calvin’s academy. When Knox left Geneva, he went home to Edinburgh in Scotland to send young ministers to learn from Calvin in Geneva. Geneva became a 16th century international center. Barzun says that Geneva was abuzz “with foreigners of all ages and origins. It was a ‘Mecca’ for the enthusiasts, a city of refuge for exiles.”⁶

Additional influence for Protestantism came from Calvin’s other writings. For example, he wrote letters to political figures across Europe commenting on the political changes on the continent. His letters showed his interest in statecraft, the results of which were more than ecclesiastical. Accordingly, Douglas F. Kelly writes,

after [Calvin] had drafted the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* for Geneva, . . . the satisfied town councils asked him to take time off from his preaching ministry in order to codify the purely civil and constitutional laws of Geneva. Calvin was well able to handle the . . . principles of legal codification because of his earlier training as a lawyer under some of the most famous legal minds of the day.⁷

“His Renaissance education . . . combined with” his scholarly mind and legal training explain his bent to theological matters and legal concerns.⁸

An early and primary example of those theological and legal concerns is found in Calvin’s dedicatory epistle in the first edition of his *Institutes*. He dedicated the first edition to Francis I, king of France. The dedication stands supreme as a defense of the persecuted evangelicals of France, of which Calvin was one. In the epistle, Calvin showed great concern for proper and ethical government. It was a refrain that would remain with him throughout his days.⁹

Additional influence to the advancement of the Reformation came from Calvin's commentary writings. He dedicated several commentaries to different rulers to encourage them not to hinder "the work of the Reformation."¹⁰

The commentaries on the Canonical Epistles honored Edward VI of England; the commentary on Isaiah was dedicated to Elizabeth I; and those on Hebrews 'to the Most Mighty and Most Serene Prince, Sigismund Augustus,¹¹ king of Poland.¹²

Calvin knew the influence rulers had, so he made use of their positions. It was not manipulative, nor was it unethical, but it was beneficial to the Reformation.

The Servetus Affair

The Michael Servetus affair came during Calvin's struggle with the Libertines. The city council, with Calvin's consent, had Servetus, an anti-Trinitarian, burned at the stake in Geneva on October 27, 1553. Servetus was found guilty of blasphemy, a crime punishable by death. It was a punishment consistent with the spirit of the age. Schaff, writing at the end of the 19th century, said, "From the standpoint of modern Christianity, . . . the burning of Servetus admits to no justification. Even the most admiring biographers of Calvin lament and disapprove his conduct in this tragedy, which has spotted his fame and given to Servetus the glory of martyrdom."¹³ Taken out of context, Schaff's comment condemns Calvin's action, but Schaff does offer a moderate defense of Calvin when he says that we should consider Calvin's actions in the light of 16th century Europe and understand that his actions were consistent with the time. Calvin acted from "a strict sense of duty and in harmony with the public law and dominant sentiment of his age, which justified the death penalty for heresy and blasphemy, and abhorred toleration as involving indifference to the truth."¹⁴

According to Schaff, Calvin's act "was an error in judgment, but not of the heart, and must be excused, though it cannot be justified." Calvin's time was a "semi-barbarous" time. Heretics—perceived and real—abounded. Innocent women "were cruelly tortured and roasted to death." Rome had its Inquisition. France, under Rome's auspices, put to death Huguenots by the thousands. Thus, to judge John Calvin with 21st century standards of correctness is wrong indeed. Perhaps Calvin, from his viewpoint, would rise to condemn us and our 21st century tolerance and lack of zeal for truth. Some points of concern before we condemn Calvin are these: Servetus was guilty of blasphemy, his sentence was in accordance to the times, he had been sentenced to death by others, and the sentence was pronounced by the councils of Geneva. Further, Calvin visited Servetus in his last hours to bring a measure of comfort to the condemned man.

Libertine Struggles

The Libertines were heretics who wanted freedom without law. They had little respect for Calvin's ideas about church government and church discipline; so they purposed to destroy any influence Calvin had. His struggle against these antinomians was so great at times that the

reformer despaired of success against their attacks. He wrote to Farel on December 14, 1547, “Affairs are in such a state of confusion that I despair of being able longer to retain the Church, at least by my own endeavors. May the Lord hear your incessant prayers in our behalf,” and three days later he wrote to Pierre Viret, a close friend, “Wickedness has now reached such a pitch here that I hardly hope that the Church can be upheld much longer, at least by means of my ministry.”

For the most part, Calvin’s enemies were the same as those who had driven him from his first stay in Geneva. According to Schaff, they never consented to his recall, and according to Calvin, the ruin of the church mattered little to them. Their desire was to have liberty to do as they pleased. They refused to be subject to laws. Calvin attributed their work to Satan and to Satan’s workshop. “These evil-doers,” he wrote, “were endowed with too great a degree of power to be easily overcome . . . [they] wished only for unbridled freedom.” The battle was so great that Calvin wrote Viret, “believe me, my power is broken, unless God stretch forth his hand.”

According to Schaff, the Libertines hated Calvin more than they hated the Pope. They named their dogs “Calvin” and phonetically twisted Calvin’s name to rhyme with “Cain.” The struggle lasted until 1556. Just before its end, Calvin wrote to another friend “Dogs bark at me on all sides. Everywhere I am saluted with the name of ‘heretic,’ and all the calumnies that can possibly be invented are heaped upon me; in a word, the enemies among my own flock attack me with greater bitterness than my beloved enemies among the papists.”

Calvin was humbled, not embittered; he was determined to serve God regardless of the unrivaled and unjustified trouble. He continued to discharge all his duties admirably. He even “found time to write some of his most important works.”

Schaff said that it seems incredible that a man of such poor health could triumph over such determined enemies over so long a time and still be able to carry out his so great duties. He attributed Calvin’s victory to “the justice of his cause and the moral purity and ‘majesty’ of his character.” Calvin himself gave glory to God for sustaining him when he wrote, “I have every reason to be contented with the service of that good Master, who has accepted me and maintained me in the honorable office which I hold, however contemptible in the eyes of the world. I should, indeed, be ungrateful beyond measure if I did not prefer this condition to all the riches and honors of the world.” Calvin’s victory came in May of 1555 in Geneva, when the Libertines “were finally defeated by a failure of an attempted rebellion.” In light of these facts, John Calvin shines as a light of the Reformation, a godly man whom we do well to honor and emulate during this 500th anniversary of his birth.

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¹“John Calvin (1509-1564): Biographical Sketch,” Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanted);

www.covenanter.org, pp, 1-3.

²George A. Gordon, *Ultimate Conceptions of Faith* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), 32.

³ *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3:2 (Summer 1999), as quoted in www.veritasdomain.wordpress.com/2008/02/28/wow-john-calvins, Feb. 28, 2008.

⁴ “John Calvin (1509-1564): Biographical Sketch,” 1-3.

⁵ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 34-36.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th through the 18th Centuries* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992), 4-6.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, transl. by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), ixx.

¹² Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty*, 4-6.

¹³ Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1910), 8:690-691.

¹⁴ Ibid. This and all subsequently quoted information are taken from this source.