

# John Calvin – Formidable Reformer

## Study Guide

### *Introduction*

It was on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517 that Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg. Therefore the last Sunday in October is Reformation Sunday in our church calendar when we remember the Reformation. We will therefore turn our attention to one of the giants of the Reformation, John Calvin. It is from John Calvin's teachings and theology that Presbyterianism developed. John Knox the Scottish father of Presbyterianism was a student of John Calvin.

In this study we will look at John Calvin's life and his theology that has shaped so much of our religious thought and in many ways the society we live in today. In this Study Guide we will just give a brief overview of Calvin's life and theology. If you want to learn more go to the following web sites:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Calvin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Calvin)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvinism>

<http://www.tlogical.net/biocalvin.htm>

[http://www.theopedia.com/John\\_Calvin](http://www.theopedia.com/John_Calvin)

### *John Calvin's Life*

- Born Jean Cauvin in Noyon, Picardie France on July 10<sup>th</sup> 1509 to Gerard Cauvin and Jeanne le Franc.
- Gerard intended that his 3 sons grow up to be priests
- At age 12, in 1521 received chaplaincy position at the La Geisine Cathedral in Noyon
- In 1523 was sent to Paris to prepare for priesthood where he went to College de Montaigu where he learned Latin
- Progressed to College de Montaigu where he remained until 1528
- In 1527 was appointed as chaplain of Saint Martin de Martheville, which is just outside Noyon.
- In 1528 his father had a disagreement with the church authorities in Noyon and ordered John to change his studies to law.
- John Calvin grudgingly obeyed his father and went to the famous law center in Orleans and a year later moved to Bourges to learn under André Alciati who was more to Calvin's taste.
- Came under influence of Melchior Wolmar whose studies were in humanities and was favorable to the new movement of the Reformation.
- In 1531 his father died and he returned to Paris to study Hebrew
- During this time his thinking moved in line with the Reformers
- In 1533 he worked with Nicholas Cop to write an inaugural address for Cop's installation as Rector of the University of Paris. The speech was entitled "Christian Philosophy" which was a treatise on the Law and the Gospel and had a lot of influence from Luther's teachings. It also launched Calvin's idea of the certainty of salvation.
- In the speech they criticized the theologians of the Sorbonne who became upset and caused Cop and Calvin to flee. Calvin did try to return but in fear of his life as many sympathizers of the Reformation were imprisoned and put to death for blasphemy.
- From 1534 he wandered from town to town often living under an assumed name. At the end of the year he moved to Strasburg to escape persecution.
- In Strasburg in 1535 and 1536 he finished the first version of his "Institutes of the Christian Religion."

- In 1536 he returned to France to visit his brother and half-sister. On his way back to Strasburg he had to detour to Geneva due to the ongoing war.
- Intended to stay in Geneva overnight but was convinced to stay to help with the growing Reformed movement. Organized much of the new church and wrote the Confessions of Faith and organized the form of services to be held. Big change was celebrating Holy Communion only once a quarter
- In 1538 conflicts arose with other church leaders and came to a head when Berne insisted that Geneva follow its liturgy. Calvin disagreed and so was asked to leave Geneva
- Returned to Strasburg and became pastor to French-speaking refugees. During this time Calvin came under the influence of Martin Bucer , a leader in the Strasburg church. From Bucer Calvin learned a great deal about theology, worship, liturgy and church organization
- Calvin spent much of his time in Strasburg studying and writing. During this time he expanded his Institutes and wrote many of his commentaries. The commentaries included all books of the New Testament, except Revelation, and 28 of the 39 Old Testament books.
- Married Idelette de Bure in 1540. She passed away in 1549 and he never remarried
- In 1539 Calvin wrote a response to Cardinal Jacob Sadoleto's proposal urging Geneva to return to the Church of Rome since the Reformed Church had fallen into disarray since Calvin had left. This reminded the people of Geneva of Calvin's brilliance.
- Calvin asked to return to Geneva and he did in 1541 picking up his preaching and teaching where he had left off. Intended to stay only a few weeks to reorganize the church but ended up staying for the next 23 years.
- During this time in Geneva he organized church into four offices to carry out ministry. These were based on New Testament and were teachers, pastors, elders and deacons.
- In 1553 there was a major controversy with Michael Servetus who did not believe in the Trinity. Servetus was tried and although Calvin sought a humane punishment Servetus was burned at the stake.
- Calvin continued to preach and teach and formed the Academy of Geneva. Geneva during this time became a center for Protestant refugees from all over Europe.
- In 1559 Calvin published the final version of the Institutes which was 4 volumes
- On May 27<sup>th</sup> 1564 Calvin died and was buried in an unmarked grave according to his wishes

## ***Calvin's Theology***

### ■ **God**

Calvin said that there could be no knowledge of self without knowledge of God. All men have a natural awareness of divinity, which is both planted in their minds and made evident through creation. However, man has suppressed or corrupted this knowledge, and confused the creation with the Creator. It is only when men contemplate the greatness of God that they can come to realize their own inadequacy. God is providentially in control of all things that come to pass, including evil things, but this does not make him the author of evil.

### ■ **Man**

Man is created in the image of God. This image has been marred by the Fall, though not destroyed. Before the Fall, man's will was truly free; however, now it is corrupt and enslaved to sin. Man is totally unable to seek or choose God unless God chooses him first.

## ■ Jesus Christ

The person of Christ, the God-man, provides the solution to this moral dilemma. Christ is the only possible bridge between God and men. In the Incarnation, God and man were joined inseparably in one person, yet not in such a way that the divine and human were confused. The relationship between Christ's human and divine natures is paradigmatic for Calvin's theology whenever the divine touches upon the human.

Calvin was the first person to describe the work of Christ in terms of the threefold offices of prophet, priest, and king. As prophet, Christ's teachings are proclaimed by the apostles for the purpose of our salvation. As priest, Christ's sacrifice of himself and his mediation before the Father secures the salvation of men. As king, Christ rules the Church spiritually in the hearts of its members.

## ■ The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit unites men to Christ when Christ is apprehended through faith in the promises of Scripture. The Spirit leads men to Christ; without him, saving faith is impossible.

## ■ Justification by faith

Justification by faith is the material principle of the Reformation. It is based upon the mercy of God, not the merits of humanity. Although the doctrines of election and predestination are linked with Calvin's name, the doctrine of election actually plays a relatively minor part of Calvin's theology. As a second-generation Reformer, his primary concern was with the government and organization of the church rather than theology. Nonetheless, Calvin believed in unconditional election.

## ■ Sacraments

Calvin taught two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's supper. He differed from sacramentalists who believed that the sacraments were a means of receiving justifying grace. Rather, they are the badges, or marks, of Christian profession, testifying to God's grace.

Calvin was a paedobaptist, believing that infants were the proper objects of baptism. He differed from Catholic and Lutheran paedobaptists in arguing that baptism did not regenerate infants. Rather, it symbolized entrance into the New Covenant, just as circumcision did for the Old Covenant. His argument for infant baptism draws many parallels between the two signs.

Whereas Luther and the Catholic church believed that Christ's body was literally present in the Eucharist, and Zwingli taught that the Lord's Supper was a mere memorial, Calvin took a middle ground between the two positions. The elements were a symbol and therefore could not be the thing they signified; the doctrines of transubstantiation and consubstantiation confused the symbol and the substance. On the other hand, Zwingli's memorialism divorced symbol and substance completely. Calvin taught that when one receives the bread and wine, which are literal food and drink, in a spiritual sense he receives the spiritual food and drink of the Christian. Christ is spiritually present when the Eucharist is received by faith.

## ■ Church government

Calvin is the founder of the Presbyterian system of church government.

At the local level, Calvin's system consisted of a council of pastors representing the local assembly, and responsible for teaching and shepherding the churches. The Consistory, a larger council comprising pastors and lay elders elected according to district, was responsible for maintaining church discipline and watching over the moral lives of church members. At the regional level is the presbytery, then above this a provincial synod and a national synod.

Church government is closely tied to church discipline. Discipline is the ordering of church life in obedience to Christ in response to the teaching of Scripture. It has a threefold aim: the glory of God, purity of the Church, and correction of the offender.

The power of the Church to punish offenders was limited to excommunication. Typically, this meant denying them the Lord's Supper, baptism for them or their children, or marriage. Although in Calvin's day the Consistory could recommend civil punishment to the city authorities which was often heeded.

## ***Calvin's Influences***

### ■ **Separation of church and state**

Calvin believed that the church should not be subject to the state, or vice versa. While both church and state are subject to God's law, they both have their own God-ordained spheres of influence. For example, the church does not have the authority to impose penalties for civil offenses, although it can call on the civil authorities to punish them. Conversely, the state is not to intrude on the operations of the church. However, it has a duty to protect the church and its ability to function *as* the church.

As a magisterial reformer, Calvin thought of the State as a Christian nation rather than a secular government. He did not advocate religious freedom in the same sense as the Baptists later would, for example. However, his ecclesiology sowed the seeds of the modern secular democracy.

### ■ **Missiology**

Geneva became a safe haven for Protestant refugees, not only from France, but all over Europe. Calvin founded a school to instruct men in Reformed theology and then train them to return home, preach the Gospel, and plant churches. The city therefore became the nucleus of missionary activity; for example, in 1561, 140 missionaries are recorded as having left Geneva.

The missionary influence of Calvin extended not only to his native France, but also to Scotland (home of the Presbyterian Church), England, northern Italy, the Netherlands, and even Poland. Calvin also sent out the first two overseas missionaries in the history of Protestantism: an expedition to Brazil in 1556.

### ■ **The Protestant work ethic**

Calvin repudiated the distinction between "sacred" and "secular" duty and the prevailing notion that work is a necessary evil. Rather, he taught, work is a calling from God. Therefore, one glorifies God in his work by working diligently and joyfully.

Calvin did not invent capitalism, but he did teach that one of the rewards of hard work is wealth. His philosophy of work allowed capitalism to flourish where it was practiced.

## ***Points to Ponder***

- What surprises you most about John Calvin?
- From this sketch of John Calvin's life, what do you imagine was most important to him?
- What were some of Calvin's greatest challenges
- Which part of Calvin's theology and teachings mean steh most to you and why?
- Where do you see the influence of John Calvin in our church