

PROFILES IN FAITH

John Calvin (1509–1564)

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The mere mention of John Calvin's name (born July 10, 1509 in Noyon, France—died May 27, 1564 in Geneva, Switzerland) produces strong reactions both pro and con. Erich Fromm, 20th century German-born American psychoanalyst and social philosopher, says that Calvin “belonged to the ranks of the greatest haters in history.” The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* maintains that Calvin was “cruel” and the “unopposed dictator of Geneva.” On the other hand, Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, says of Calvin, “I have been a witness of him for sixteen years and I think that I am fully entitled to say that in this man there was exhibited to all an example of the life and death of the Christian such as it will not be easy to depreciate, and it will be difficult to imitate.” Philip Schaff, church historian, writes of Calvin, “Taking into account all his failings, he must be reckoned as one of the greatest and best of men whom God raised up in the history of Christianity.” William Cunningham, Scottish theologian, maintains, “Calvin is the man who, next to St. Paul, has done the most good to mankind.” Charles Haddon Spurgeon, English preacher, asserts, “The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin's system is the nearest to perfection.”

Basil Hall, Cambridge professor, once wrote an essay, “The Calvin Legend,” in which he argues that formerly those who depreciated Calvin had at least read his works, whereas now the word “Calvin” or “Calvinism” is used as a word with negative connotations but with little or no content. Many stories float around about him that are utterly false. For instance, Aldous Huxley puts forward as fact an old and groundless legend, writing, “Our fathers took the fifth commandment seriously—how seriously may be judged from the fact that during the Great Calvin's theocratic rule of Geneva a child was publicly decapitated for having ventured to strike its parents.” There is no evidence whatsoever in the records of Geneva for this story and no legal grounds in Geneva for this action to have been justified. Likewise, the caricature of Calvin as “cruel” or a “dictator” or filled with “hatred” is either

totally false or a distortion of the truth. Who is this Calvin who can be so praised or vilified?

Conversion

Calvin's parents, Gerard and Jeanne, had five sons. Antoine and Francois died in childhood. John was the second son to grow to maturity. Gerard had become a successful lawyer and had prominent contacts. He had ambitions for his sons and provided a good education for them. Gerard wanted John to follow a career in the church, and thus he was sent to the University of Paris for his studies. Having completed his arts courses, he was prepared for doctoral theological study. However, Gerard changed his mind and decided that John should study law. John submitted to this request and spent the next several years at the University of Orleans studying law. While there, he was exposed to the classical writers such as Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, Plato, and Aristotle. In fact, his first published work (when he was only 22 years old) was *Commentary on Seneca's 'De Clementia.'*

Sometime during this period, he experienced a profound conversion, although the details of how it came about are not clear. Calvin speaks of this change in his *Commentary on the Psalms*:

God drew me from obscure and lowly beginnings and conferred on me that most honorable office of herald and minister of the Gospel.... What happened first was that by an unexpected conversion he tamed to teachableness a mind too stubborn for its years.... And so this mere taste of true godliness that I received set me on fire with such a desire to progress that I pursued the rest of my studies more coolly, although I did not give them up altogether. Before a year had slipped by, anybody who longed for a purer doctrine kept on coming to learn from me, still a beginner and a raw recruit.

Calling to Geneva

He eventually became known as a “Lutheran” and had to go into hiding, fearing for his life. Eventually, he made his way to Basel where, still a young man of

twenty-seven, Calvin wrote the first edition of what became his classic work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in 1536. (The final edition was completed in 1559.) This first edition was intended as a general introduction for those who had a hunger and thirst for Christ but had little real knowledge of Him. This little book spread quickly and was read by a wide audience. Its appeal was that it showed the faith of the Reformation to be consistent with the great creeds, loyal to the political authorities, and desiring obedience to God's Law, contrary to opposition caricatures.

During a trip to Strasbourg, Calvin was forced to take a detour through Geneva and happened to spend the night at an inn. When William Farel, church leader in Geneva, heard that the author of the *Institutes* was in town, he went straight to the inn. Farel desperately desired a helper in his task and saw in Calvin an ideal assistant. He pleaded with Calvin to consider coming to work with him in Geneva. Calvin resisted Farel's pleas. Calvin saw himself as a scholar and writer and wanted to spend his days in quiet reading and writing, not as a pastor or administrator. Farel became desperate, and as Calvin later described it:

Farel detained me in Geneva, not so much by counsel and exhortation as by a dreadful curse, which I felt to be as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me...he proceeded to utter the imprecation that God would curse my retirement and the tranquility of the studies which I sought, if I should withdraw and refuse to help, when the necessity was so urgent. By this imprecation, I was so terror struck, that I gave up the journey I had undertaken; but sensible of my natural shyness and timidity, I would not tie myself to any particular office.

When Calvin and Farel were banished from Geneva over a year later, Calvin finally arrived at Strasbourg and had three enjoyable years of study and teaching. It was during this period that he met his wife, Idelette.

Idelette

When Calvin arrived in Strasbourg, he initially stayed with fellow Reformer Martin Bucer and his wife Elizabeth. Their home was known as an "inn of righteousness," and they had a very happy marriage. Martin would often say to John, "You ought to have a wife." John seems not to have been a romantic as we can see from his qualifications for a wife:

Always keep in mind what I seek to find in her, for I am none of those insane lovers who embrace also the vices of those with whom they are in love, where

they are smitten at first with a fine figure. This is the only beauty that allures me: if she is chaste, if not too fussy or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested in my health.

Various people tried to arrange a marriage for him. First, a wealthy German woman was suggested, but she didn't seem eager to learn French. Another was suggested about fifteen years older than Calvin. Yet another young woman was brought to Strasbourg for an interview, and Calvin was so hopeful that he set a tentative marriage date. But again, it didn't work out. Finally, a young widow whom he already knew as part of his congregation, Idelette, was suggested to him by Bucer. Idelette's husband, Jean Stordeur, had been an Anabaptist leader with whom Calvin debated, and eventually, they became members of Calvin's church in Strasbourg. Jean later died of the plague. Idelette was attractive, intelligent, and a woman of character. She also desired a good father for her children. John later described her as "the faithful helper of my ministry" and "the best companion of my life." They had three children: one died at two weeks old, another at birth, and a third, born prematurely, also died. Their marriage lasted nine years. Idelette became sick, probably with tuberculosis, and died at age forty. John wrote to his friend Viret:

You know how tender, or rather, soft my heart is. If I did not have strong self-control, I would not have been able to stand it this long. My grief is very heavy. My best life's companion is taken away from me. Whenever I faced serious difficulties, she was ever ready to share with me, not only banishment and poverty, but even death itself.

Although Calvin himself was only forty when Idelette died, he never remarried.

Back to Geneva

After the three years in Strasbourg, Farel and Calvin were urged by leaders in Geneva to return. Reluctantly, they did. John and Idelette were given a house by the lake with room for a garden where Idelette grew vegetables, herbs, and flowers. Calvin remained in Geneva the rest of his life.

During his twenty-five year ministry in Geneva, he preached an average of five sermons a week. He preached twice every Sunday and every day of alternate weeks. In the weeks he was not preaching, he lectured three times as an Old Testament professor. He wrote a commentary on nearly every book of the Bible and on many theological topics. His letters alone fill eleven volumes or some 40,000 pages of his *Works*. He

had many meetings in Geneva with pastors, deacons, and visitors. On top of it all, his health was characteristically poor. It is amazing, given his schedule and its constant interruptions, that he was able to accomplish so much.

Even in Strasbourg, his schedule was busy. He writes in a letter about one such day's work:

When the messenger came to collect the beginning of my book, I had to re-read twenty sheets of printer's proofs. I also had a lecture, a sermon, four letters to write, a certain dispute to settle, and more than ten visitors, all of whom required attention.

In a letter to Bucer, he wrote, "I cannot recall two consecutive hours without interruption." At Geneva, it was even worse; he wrote: "I do not even have one hour free." In another letter, he wrote, "The difficulty is the vexations and brain racking interruptions which occur twenty or more times while I am writing one letter." Yet Calvin continued to work hard. He did not like to waste time. Even on his deathbed he continued to work. When his friends told him to take it easy, he said, "What! Would you have the Lord find me idle when He comes?"

Calvin had a real love and sensitivity for people. Once when he was sending a letter to his friend Viret using a student as messenger, he noticed another student looking somewhat jealous. Immediately, he wrote another note to Viret telling him to pretend that the note was important and sent it using the second student as messenger.

We particularly see this sensitivity in his letters to his friends. For instance, he was sensitive to any criticism from Bucer, whom he regarded as a father figure. He wrote to Bucer, "If at any point I do not come up to your expectations, you know that I am in your power. Warn or punish. Do whatever is the right of a father toward his son." Bucer responded, "You are my heart and soul."

In a letter to Melanchthon, Luther's lieutenant and a frequent recipient of letters from Calvin, he wrote:

Can we not, as you say, talk more often, if only by letter? The gain would not be yours, but mine, for nothing in the world is more precious than the pleasure I find in reading your charming letters.

Of his friendships with men such as Farel and Viret, he wrote in his dedication to his *Commentary on Titus*:

I am sure that nowhere have friends ever lived in such close fellowship and companionship as we have done

in our ministry... It seems as if you and I are just one person.

That does not mean that Calvin was unable or unwilling to rebuke his friends. For instance, once he wrote to Farel:

I am given to understand that your very full sermons are giving some ground for complaint. I beg you earnestly to restrict yourself, even forcibly if necessary, rather than offer Satan any handle which he will be quick to seize. We do not speak for our own benefit but for that of our people. We must remember proportion in teaching, so that boredom does not give rise to disrespect.... Do not think that you can expect from everyone an enthusiasm equal to your own.

Or to Melanchthon—who seems to have been somewhat timid like the New Testament's Timothy—he writes:

Let us follow our course with unswerving mind ... Hesitation in the general or standard bearer is far more shameful than is the flight of simple soldiers... In giving way a little you have given rise to more complaints and groans than would have done the open desertion of a hundred ordinary men.

Calvin's Theology

Many books have been written about Calvin's theology. It is impossible to do justice to the subject in this article, except to mention a few things that Calvin's theology was *not*.

First, Calvin's sole or primary emphasis was *not* predestination. Basically, he inherited and passed on this doctrine from earlier writers: Augustine (whom he quotes more often in the *Institutes* than any other non-biblical writer), Thomas Aquinas, and Martin Luther (*Bondage of the Will*). In his 1559 edition of *Institutes*, he devotes only ninety pages of more than 1,500 pages to predestination and covers this doctrine in Book III under the doctrine of salvation and not in Book I under the doctrine of God. In fact, if it were not for a couple of critics, Pigiuis and Bolsec, to whom Calvin responded with a treatise, we would have very little on this subject in Calvin's writing. He was particularly concerned with this doctrine (as with others) to go as far as Scripture goes and no further. B.B. Warfield calls Augustine the theologian of grace, Luther the theologian of justification, and Calvin the theologian of the Holy Spirit because of his emphasis and unique development of this Biblical teaching.

Second, Calvin was *not* a cold, dry theologian. At Pittsburgh Theological Seminary I studied with Ford

Lewis Battles, who was a Calvin scholar and translator of his *Institutes*. I remember him telling me that Romans 1:21 was Calvin's life verse, particularly the phrase, "they knew God, (but) they did not honor Him or give thanks." Calvin believed that we live to honor God and to give Him thanks. The section entitled "Prayer" in *Institutes*, Book III, is classic. Calvin maintained that the "principal work of the Spirit" is faith and the "principal exercise of faith is prayer." Summing up life in Christ, he says:

The sum total comes back to this: Since the Scripture teaches us that it's a principal part of the service of God to invoke him ... he values this homage we do him more than all sacrifices.

Karl Barth, in his *The Christian Life*, understands that he is standing in the heritage of the Reformers when he argues that the central virtue of spiritual life is invocation—calling on His name in prayer. Barth then structures the whole of "the Christian life" around the Lord's Prayer. Calvin, too, saw prayer as the primary thing in our lives.

Third, Calvin was *not* a narrow parochial thinker. He was openly appreciative of truth wherever he found it. His emphases were later called the doctrine of "common grace." In his *Institutes* II.ii 15, Calvin writes:

What then? Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God? Let us be ashamed of such ingratitude. Those men whom Scripture calls "natural men" were indeed sharp and penetrating in their investigation of things below. Let us accordingly learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.

In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin ascribes many human actions and advances to the work of the Holy Spirit:

For the invention of the arts, and of other things which serve to the common use and convenience of life, is a gift from God by no means to be despised, and a faculty worthy of commendation...as the experience of all ages teaches us how widely the rays of divine light have shone on unbelieving nations, for the benefit of the present life; and we see at the present time that the excellent gifts of the Spirit are diffused through the whole human race.

So, far from being narrow in his perspective and unappreciative of pagan thought, he was willing to value all truth as God's truth.

Servetus

The first historical essay I wrote in college was about the episode in Geneva with Michael Servetus, Spanish physician and self-styled theologian, and the controversy over toleration and religious liberty it caused. Servetus was judged by civil authorities as a heretic for vehemently denying the Trinity and other central doctrines of faith. He was burned in Geneva with Calvin's approval.

Many excuses for this action have been made, such as: death for heretics was part of the spirit of the age; Servetus was foolish in his provoking action by the state; Calvin sought on numerous occasions to persuade Servetus of his errors; Calvin sought a less painful death for Servetus; and the Swiss cities agreed to his punishment. None of these qualifications excuse Calvin. Perhaps the unintended but beneficial consequence was that the reaction by Castellio and others to Servetus' death had an influence on the belief in religious liberty today.

Last Days

Calvin's last days were spent working as much as he could, writing, preaching, and teaching. Sometimes he was carried to a chair in the pulpit to preach. When the end was near, "Lord, how long!" was the cry on his lips. In a final meeting with Geneva's ministers, he confessed his faults and asked for forgiveness for anything he had done to offend them. Calvin gave instructions that he be buried in an ordinary cemetery with no gravestone so that no one would make it a shrine. As a result, his gravesite is unknown.

J.I. Packer sums up this complex personality. Calvin was:

Bible-centered in his method, God-centered in his outlook, Christ-centered in his message; he was controlled throughout by a vision of God on the throne and a passion that God should be glorified... He lived as he preached and wrote, for the glory of God. Good theologians are not always good men, nor vice versa,

but Calvin's life and theology were all of a piece. Consistency was his hallmark, both as a thinker and as a writer.

*NOTE: If you wish to do further reading on Calvin, Alister McGrath's biography, *A Life of John Calvin*, would be a good place to start. If you are really ambitious, try reading the *Institutes*, which Wesley (despite some disagreements) claimed was the most valuable book next to the Bible. Or, try any of Calvin's commentaries on the Bible. His goal of clarity and brevity mixed with much practical application make these works some of the most helpful guides to Scripture anywhere.*

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