

John Calvin—the Man and His Preaching
Steven J. Cole

The Life and Times of John Calvin

In my spiritual life, the men who have helped me the most possess two qualities: solid biblical scholarship and a fervent heart of devotion for God. Some are impressive Bible scholars, but they are like spiritual dry toast. These men could look at a picture of a beautiful mountain scene and criticize the technical skill of the photographer, while missing the dramatic beauty of the picture. To use another analogy, they are like builders who spend all their time on the foundation or looking at detailed blueprints, but they never get the whole thing built so that they can stand back and enjoy its beauty and function.

On the other hand, there are those who are fervent in their love for Jesus, but their doctrine is so shallow that you're not sure if they know much at all about who Jesus really is. They get tossed around by every wind of doctrine that comes along. To use the earlier analogy, they build the house without any thought to the foundation or the plans. You wouldn't want to move into such a house!

But men who know the Scriptures and base everything on the Word, who have thought through the great doctrines of the faith, and out of such study have a heart of love for the Savior, feed me! It may surprise you to learn that John Calvin was just such a man. He is usually perceived as being a stern, cold, austere scholar. But when you read his writings, you learn that devotion for Christ and a desire for His glory drove John Calvin. Certainly any man whose writings are not only still in print, but widely read and extolled, nearly 450 years after his death, is worth getting to know!

Calvin was born in France in 1509. When Martin Luther nailed his now-famous 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenburg, Calvin was just 8 years old. Calvin's home, like almost every other home in France, was Roman Catholic. His grandparents were common people; one grandfather was a barrel-maker and boatman, the other an innkeeper. Calvin's father had improved his lot by becoming a successful lawyer. At first he determined that his son would be a clergyman, serving as a chaplain to one of the universities. But after Calvin had studied in this direction for a while, learning Latin and philosophy, his father changed his mind and decided that John should be a lawyer. Although John had no love for studying law, as a dutiful son he complied.

During these years, the printing press, which was less than 75 years old, was revolutionizing society by disseminating affordable editions of the Latin and Greek classics, as well as Greek and Hebrew

Bibles. Many of the Reformation pamphlets and books were also being circulated. While Calvin studied law at Orleans, some of his friends had made the shift into the ranks of the Reformation. One was Calvin's cousin, Pierre Robert, nicknamed Olivetanus ("Midnight Oil") because of his habit of late night studying. Through his influence, Calvin began reading the Bible and began to abhor many of the superstitions and rites of the Roman Catholic Church. At some time in 1529 or early 1530 (some put it as late as 1532), Calvin was converted. His only reference to his conversion is an obscure one in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms.

In setting forth his credentials to expound on the Psalms, Calvin compares himself with David, whom God chose from the sheepfold to be in a position of authority, in that God chose Calvin from humble beginnings to be a preacher and minister of the gospel. He describes how he was pursuing a career in law. Then, in his words (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker reprint] preface to Psalms, pp. xl, xli),

And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardor.

He goes on to say that within a year, he was surprised to find that people who desired after purer doctrine were coming to him to learn. Being a shy and reclusive man, he sought a place where he could be more withdrawn from public view, but God did not allow it and instead thrust him into public notice. In his attempt to get away, and to escape from official persecution in France, Calvin moved to Basel, Germany. While there, he heard reports of Christians being burned at the stake in France. They were being falsely accused of all sorts of things. He knew that if he kept quiet and did not do all within his power to oppose such tyranny, he would be a coward and traitor to the cause of Christ. This motivated him to write and publish the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (preface to Psalms, pp. xli, xlii). The word "Institutes" might better be translated "Principles," but it has so long been called the Institutes that that title has stuck.

The original edition (published in 1536, written before Calvin was 27, less than six years after his conversion) was a relatively brief treatise (about 500 pages) intended as an elementary manual for general

readers who wanted to know something about the evangelical faith. He wanted to correct some of the slanderous things being said about those holding to the Reformation teachings and he wanted to provide instruction in matters of salvation and godliness for those who did not yet have a knowledge of God. He wanted to show that evangelicals held to the great creeds of Christendom, that they sought to obey God's moral law, and that they were loyal to the established political order.

Thus he had two main purposes in writing the *Institutes*: first, to show that the evangelical faith was not some radical new thing, but rather the faith of Christ and the apostles, and that it was the Catholic Church that had departed far from the truths of the Bible; and, second, to give instruction in the principles of salvation and godly living for people who desired to know God, but, invariably, had been led astray by Rome. T. H. L. Parker says, "Calvin intended it to be elementary" (*John Calvin* [Lion], p. 42). The original version had six chapters on the Law, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the sacraments, false sacraments, and final chapter on Christian liberty, church government, and civil government. The prefatory address to King Francis sought to persuade him to lift the persecution against evangelical Christians. John McNeill writes, "Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is one of the few books that have profoundly affected the course of history" (*The History and Character of Calvinism* [Oxford], p. 119). Throughout his life, he worked on multiple revisions, until the final version of 1559.

The book met with immediate popularity, which seemed almost to embarrass Calvin. He kept it a secret in Basel and everywhere else he went that he was the author of the work. In August, 1536, he was on his way to Strasbourg by a roundabout way because of a local war. His party stopped in Geneva to spend the night, intending to resume their journey in the morning. Geneva had just decided for the Reformation a month or two earlier under the leadership of William Farel. Someone told Farel that the author of the *Institutes* was staying in town that night. Farel went straight to the inn and sought to persuade Calvin to settle in Geneva and help with the struggling new church.

Calvin protested that he was a scholar and writer, not a pastor or administrator. He told Farel that he would have to find someone else to help. Calvin said he was heading for Strasbourg in the morning. Farel finally grew so frustrated that he pronounced what Calvin later called "a dreadful imprecation," saying that if he pursued his course of staying out of the limelight so that he could study, God would curse his studies. Calvin, who always had a sensitive conscience, was terror-stricken. He stopped his journey, settled in Geneva, and lived there until his death in 1564, except for three years (1538-1541) when he was banished by his opponents. Even during his banishment he sought to return to

his private ways, but Martin Bucer laid hold of him in a manner similar to that of Farel and persuaded him that he must be in public ministry. He dreaded the return to Geneva when that invitation came, but he went in obedience to God.

Calvin has been one of the most maligned and misunderstood men in the history of the church. Jerome Bolsec, a monk who was converted to Protestantism, but fell out with Calvin over his view of predestination and returned to the Roman Catholic Church, accused Calvin "of being ambitious, presumptuous, arrogant, cruel, evil, vindictive, avaricious, greedy, and ignorant; an imposter and charlatan who claimed he could raise the dead; a lover of rich fare and a bi-sexual who indulged sexually with any and every female within walking distance and for whose homosexual habits his birth city ... had sentenced him to be branded with a hot iron; and who, as an outcast of God, was 'eaten with lice and vermin all over his body,' wasted away as punishment for his sins, and died cursing and swearing as a blasphemer" (in Robert Reymond, *John Calvin: His Life and Influence* [Evangelical Press], p. 135. If any of these charges were true, Calvin would not have influenced thousands of godly men down through the centuries. But the outlandish vehemence shows how much some have hated the man!

Listen to these other examples (from *Christian History* magazine, Vol. V, No. 4, p. 3):

"Better with Beza in hell than with Calvin in heaven!" (A saying coined by Calvin's enemies in Geneva.)

"[Calvin] belonged to the ranks of the greatest haters in history." (Erich Fromm)

[Calvin was] "one of the terribly pure men who pitilessly enforce principles." (H. Daniel Ropps, Catholic theologian)

"But we shall always find it hard to love the man [Calvin] who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense." (Will Durant, historian)

"The famous Calvin, whom we regard as the Apostle of Geneva, raised himself up to the rank of Pope of the Protestants." (Voltaire, French philosopher)

"Calvin has, I believe, caused untold millions of souls to be damned ..." (Jimmy Swaggart, evangelist)

"If Calvin ever wrote anything in favor of religious liberty, it was a typographical error." (Roland Bainton, Yale Church historian)

[Calvin was] the "cruel" and "the unopposed dictator of Geneva." (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*)

As the last quote alleges, he is often pictured as the mean despot who ruled Geneva with absolute authority. The fact is, he was a godly, humble man who was strongly opposed. He had many enemies, he never held civil office, and he wasn't even granted citizenship until 1559, five years before his death.

Calvin's opponents did not just argue against his views. Although by nature Calvin was very shy, frail, and hated conflict, his enemies often sicked their dogs on him, fired their muskets outside the window of his house and outside the church during his preaching. They sometimes tried to drown out his preaching by coughing loudly or talking. They threatened to kill him and they spread deliberately false stories about him. J. I. Packer says, "The amount of misrepresentation to which Calvin's theology has been subjected is enough to prove his doctrine of total depravity several times over" (*Great Leaders of the Christian Church* [Moody], ed. by John Woodbridge, p. 213).

From his late 20's on, Calvin suffered many physical infirmities: impaired digestion (he only ate one meal a day), migraines, lung hemorrhages, perhaps tuberculosis, chronic asthma, kidney stones, hemorrhoids, frequent fever, and gout. He did not sleep more than four hours a night. Even when he was ill, he kept four secretaries going with dictation in both French and Latin. He revised and expanded the *Institutes* over the course of his life, until the final 1559 edition. He wrote commentaries on almost every book of the Bible, based on the original Hebrew and Greek, which he knew well. His correspondence to leaders of the Reformation around the world and to others takes up 11 volumes. He preached two different sermons every Sunday, plus every day on alternate weeks (6 a.m., 7 in the winter). He averaged 170 sermons per year (Reymond, p. 84). The weeks he wasn't preaching every day he lectured three times to pastoral students. He also met every Thursday with the Consistory (church leaders), counseled with numerous individuals, and entertained many guests at his home.

When Calvin was 31, he married Idelette, the widow of a friend. She had two children from her first husband. She and Calvin had a premature son who died at two weeks old. They had a daughter who died at birth and another child was born prematurely and died. Idelette's health declined from there. She probably had tuberculosis and died after nine years of marriage to John. While many of Calvin's Geneva enemies attacked him, even naming their dogs after him, what was most difficult for him to bear was when they attacked his wife. They spread rumors that she was a woman of ill repute and that her two children had been born out of wedlock. They said that the reason she and Calvin could not have children was God's punishment for her previous immorality. Calvin saw her as his best friend and supporter, and her death left him overwhelmed by grief. He never married again.

Calvin's Preaching

Calvin believed that "the preacher's primary task was to expound Holy Scripture, which is, so to say, the voice of God himself" (T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* [Westminster/John Knox

Press], p. 17; hereafter, CP). In Calvin's opinion, preaching was like a visitation from God, through which He reaches out His hands to draw us to Himself (*Christian History*, [V, 4], p. 10). He insisted "that the preacher is to invent nothing of his own but declare only what has been revealed and recorded in Holy Scripture" (CP, p. 22). Parker says (p. 107), "Through all the variety occasioned by the variety of the texts there runs the Biblical point of view—the hidden God reveals himself for man's eternal and temporal good. It is this that governs Calvin's interpretation and application of his texts."

Thankfully, there are many volumes of Calvin's sermons still in print. I have read many of them and have found them to have many rich devotional insights. They are not carefully structured, but are more like a practical running commentary on the text. Calvin could prepare a sermon in an hour or less (Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin* [Evangelical Press], p. 124). But remember that he had written commentaries on almost all of the texts that he preached on and he had an amazing memory that enabled him to recall almost everything! He emphasized the need for studious, thoughtful preparation (CP, p. 81). He preached without notes, directly from his Hebrew or Greek Bible (*ibid.*). He could remember all that he studied and bring it to bear on the sermon, even when it involved a wealth of historical detail (Beza, p. 124). He would explain the text simply, in language that the people could understand (CP, pp. 141, 148). He never cited Hebrew or Greek words directly in sermons (CP, p. 86), but he was always knowledgeable of interpretive issues and options. He often cites the views of other scholars (without naming them) before giving his opinion and the reasons for it.

Although he never used anecdotes in the pulpit, he sometimes used satirical humor. For example, he said, "One does not hear a single word of teaching from [the Pope's] mouth; that would impair his dignity." Or, "when women who put on make-up come out into the sun and get hot, the make-up comes off and one sees the wrinkles." So it is with hypocrites (CP, p. 148).

In Geneva's three churches, the Word was preached every day of the week and twice on Sunday, with sermons lasting for more than an hour. Calvin rarely preached topical sermons, but rather taught consecutively through books of the Bible. When he was banished from Geneva for three years, his first Sunday back in the pulpit he picked up with the next verse following his previous sermon three years before (T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin* [Lion], p. 108)! Sometimes he would preach several sermons on a single verse. At other times, he would cover several verses (CP, p. 84).

He preached 123 sermons on Genesis, 200 on Deuteronomy, 159 on Job, 174 on Ezekiel, 189 on Acts, and even 25 sermons on the 5 chapters of Lamentations and 5 sermons on the one chapter of Obadiah (CP, p. 159)!

The typical stereotype of Calvin is that he was a stern, stuffy, academic theologian, who constantly harped on predestination in a cold, heartless manner. But, actually, he was deeply devotional and godly in his personal life. He emphasized that a preacher must study the Bible because he loves it and because it moves him (CP, p. 39). He said, "To be good theologians we must lead a holy life. The Word of God is not to teach us to prattle, not to make us eloquent and subtle and I know not what. It is to reform our life, so that it is known that we desire to serve God, to give ourselves entirely to him and to conform ourselves to his good will" (CP, p. 15).

"For Calvin the message of Scripture is sovereign, sovereign over the congregation and sovereign over the preacher" (*ibid.*). Thus when he preached, Calvin put himself with the congregation under the preeminence of the message of Scripture. Parker (p. 119) observes that Calvin didn't impatiently berate his hearers or rebuke them with a holier than thou attitude. Rather, "It is simply one man, conscious of his sins, aware how little progress he makes and how hard it is to be a doer of the Word, sympathetically passing on to his people (whom he knows to have the same sort of problems as himself) what God has said to them and to him."

Although he was shy in private, in the pulpit he was passionate and dynamic. He was aware of the authority of the Word as coming from God, and so people needed to be pierced. "The preacher has to use vehemence, so that we may know that this is not a game" (CP, pp. 10, 12). The preacher must combine sweetness and gentleness with vigor and vehemence (CP, p. 14). He must speak as an ambassador, "in a way that shows he is not pretending" (CP, p. 115). In a comment that could be aimed at the modern trend toward entertainment and drama in the church, he said, "Let us learn that God does not intend there to be churches as places for people to make merry and laugh in, as if a comedy were being acted here. But there must be majesty in his Word, by which we may be moved and affected" (*ibid.*).

If you want to learn more, I highly commend Parker's *Calvin's Preaching*. From that work and from my reading of Calvin's sermons and commentaries, let me summarize some of the key lessons that we can learn from his preaching.

Lessons from Calvin's Preaching:

(1) Preaching should clearly explain and practically apply the text of Scripture. The text should determine the structure and development of the sermon. Some texts require more explanation before we move to application. Other texts are fairly obvious in their meaning, but require practical understanding on how to implement the text into daily life. But the text should govern the message. A verse should never be a springboard for us to launch off on our own ideas.

(2) Preaching should exalt God in His holiness, majesty, and sovereign might. The aim of preaching is that God may be the better honored and glorified among us (CP, p. 46). Calvin often reverently refers to God as "the Majesty." His messages breathe a holy reverence for God.

(3) Preaching should humble sinners and expose our true guilt before God's holiness. Preaching on Paul's statement that he is the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13-15), Calvin says, "Paul humbled himself in this confession, in order that God's glory might be the better known. And this is a general truth; God is never exalted as he deserves to be unless we are completely ashamed and overwhelmed" (CP, pp. 103-104). He often mentions our own complete poverty and wretchedness (CP, p. 95). Lest you think that Calvin piously blasted his hearers, Parker points out (p. 116) that Calvin aimed every sermon first and foremost at himself. He was not just imposing Scripture on others, but he had to be the first to obey it. Calvin humorously said, "It would be better for [the preacher] to break his neck going up into the pulpit if he does not take pains to be the first to follow God" (CP, p. 40). Parker observes (p. 119), "Because he is always aware of his solidarity in sin with all his hearers, there is no moral brutality of the strong Christian bullying the weak."

(4) Preaching should exalt the Lord Jesus Christ and His grace as shown on the cross as the sinner's only remedy, received through faith alone. Calvin says that when the word humbles us by true self-knowledge, we flee to the grace of Christ (CP, p. 30). The only subject being treated throughout every sermon is, "God as he gives himself to be known by us in Jesus Christ" (CP, p. 97). He said, "So, then, our faith must look to our Lord Jesus Christ and our gaze must be fastened entirely on him, or else we cannot approach God his Father—for in ourselves we are too far away" (CP, p. 99). This is not to say that every sermon focuses on Christ or the gospel. When he preached through Old Testament books, Calvin stuck to the historical context in his interpretation and exposition. But then he would apply it in light of Christ and the gospel (CP, p. 92).

(5) Preaching should emphasize the practical application of Scripture. The aim of all preaching is to change our lives. Even in his commentaries, you can scarcely find a page where Calvin does not apply the text in a practical way. In expounding on 2 Timothy 3:16, which says that Scripture is profitable for reproof and correction, he said, “Those who cannot bear to be reproved had better look for another school-master than God. There are many who will not stand it: ‘What! Is this the way to teach? Ho! We want to be won by sweetness.’ You do? Then go and teach God his lessons! ‘Ho! We want to be won in another style.’ Well, then, go to the devil’s school! He will flatter you enough—and destroy you” (CP, p. 14).

He said (CP, pp. 11-12), “When I expound Holy Scripture, I must always make this my rule: That those who hear me may receive profit from the teaching I put forward and be edified unto salvation.” He goes on to say that if we do not aim at that, we profane God’s Word. He asks, “Why do we come to the sermon?” He answers, “It is that God may govern us and that we may have our Lord Jesus Christ as sovereign Teacher” (CP, p. 26). Growth in holiness is always the bottom line of preaching.

Conclusion

I agree with J. I. Packer, who writes of Calvin (*Great Leaders*, p. 213),

He was, in fact, the finest exegete, the greatest systematic theologian, and the profoundest religious thinker that the Reformation produced. Bible-centered in his teaching, God-centered in his living, and Christ-centered in his faith, he integrated the confessional emphases of Reformation thought—faith *alone*, by Scripture *alone*, by grace *alone*, by Christ *alone*, for God’s glory *alone*—with supreme clarity and strength. He was ruled by two convictions that are written on every regenerate heart and expressed in every act of real prayer and real worship: God is all and man is nothing; and praise is due to God for everything good. Both convictions permeated his life, right up to his final direction that his tomb be unmarked and there be no speeches at his burial, lest he become the focus of praise instead of his God. Both convictions permeate his theology too.

Theodore Beza, who worked closely with Calvin in Geneva and became his successor after Calvin’s death, knew Calvin as few men did. He wrote of him (*Christian History*, p. 19), “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.” This understanding of Calvin as a godly man, who has had an almost unparalleled impact on the history of the church, suggests that we all can learn much from John Calvin and his preaching.