

THE LIFE AND THEOLOGY OF JOHN CALVIN
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The purpose of this paper is to investigate the life and theology of John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin was perhaps the most influential leader of all the great leaders of the Reformation era.¹ Calvin's biblical and theological writings are the main reason for his continuing influence to the present day. He wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible except the Song of Solomon and Revelation and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was the dominant systematic theology of the Reformation.² The *Institutes* are still regarded as the authoritative expression of Reformed theology.³ For these reasons the study of the life and theology of John Calvin is vital if we are to understand the essence of Reformed theology.

Calvin's Life

John Calvin was born in Noyon, France on July 10, 1509.⁴ There is not much known of his early home life. At the age of fourteen, his father sent him to the University of Paris in order to study theology.⁵ Five years later, in 1525 or 1526, Calvin's life experienced a dramatic

¹Howard F. Vos, *Exploring Church History* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 92.

²*Ibid.*, 93.

³Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through The Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 305.

⁴T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 2.

⁵John Piper, "The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and his Preaching" (lecture presented at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, February 4, 1997), [on-line]; accessed 14 December 2004; available from <http://www.desiringgod.org/library/biographies/97calvin.html>; Internet.

change. His father, Gérard, suddenly decided to withdraw him from the University of Paris and sent him to the University of Orléans in order to study civil law.⁶ While studying law, Calvin gained a mastery of the Greek language. Shortly after Calvin completed the law course, Gérard died in May of 1531.⁷ This event seems to have provided the freedom for Calvin to turn from law to his first love, the classics.⁸ In 1532, he published his first book, a *Commentary on Seneca*, at the age of twenty-one.⁹

Some time in 1529 or early 1530 Calvin was converted.¹⁰ He described it as a “sudden conversion” (*conversio subita*).¹¹ Although Calvin described his conversion in this way, he did not receive the gospel in a superficial way.

Offended by the novelty, I lent an unwilling ear, and at first, I confess, strenuously and passionately resisted; for (such is the firmness or effrontery with which it is natural to men to persist in the course which they have once undertaken) it was with the greatest difficulty I was induced to confess that I had all my life long been in ignorance and error.¹²

After being implicated with Nicholas Cop, who was a friend of Calvin and rector of the University of Paris, in a convocation address on All Saints Day 1533, that proclaimed Christ alone as man’s mediator with God, Calvin was forced to flee for his life from Paris.¹³ He found

⁶Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 13.

⁷Ibid., 24.

⁸Piper, “The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and his Preaching.”

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 22.

¹¹Timothy George, “Glory unto God: John Calvin,” in *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 171.

¹²Ibid., 172.

¹³Ibid., 175-176.

refuge in the city of Basel where the first edition of Calvin's *Institutes* were published in 1536.¹⁴ The *Institutes* would consequently go through five enlargements culminating in its present form in 1559.¹⁵ However, the real issue driving Calvin to write the *Institutes* was not a desire to produce an academic treatise, but to defend the faith of those protesting the Catholic church who were in turn being persecuted. Years later he wrote of his motivation in writing the *Institutes*:

But lo! while I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France. . . . It appeared to me, that unless I opposed [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration which induced me to publish my *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. . . . It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed.¹⁶

John Piper reminded the 21st Century church of this important point by saying, “. . . when you hold the *Institutes* of John Calvin in your hand, remember that theology, for John Calvin, was forged in the furnace of burning flesh, and that Calvin could not sit idly by without some effort to vindicate the faithful and the God for whom they suffered.”¹⁷ Remembering this fact will yield the appropriate solemnity when approaching the *Institutes*.

Later in the same year of 1536, Calvin headed to Strasbourg in order to lead a quiet scholarly life. A local war had caused the road to Strasbourg to be blocked and forced Calvin to travel through the city of Geneva, a city that had been nominally Protestant for about a decade.¹⁸ It was here that the fiery Guillaume Farel, a local Protestant pastor, warned Calvin of the curse of

¹⁴Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, 33.

¹⁵Piper, “The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and his Preaching.”

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸James I. Packer, “John Calvin and Reformed Europe,” in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, ed. John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988) 211.

God that would be upon him if he refused to stay and help in the work in Geneva.¹⁹ A reluctant Calvin agreed to forego his planned life as a student and writer of theology.²⁰ This single act insured that every page Calvin “wrote would be hammered out on the anvil of pastoral responsibility.”²¹

Calvin’s Theology

Hundreds of thousands of pages have been written about Calvin’s theology. What follows is a summary of three important emphases of Calvin’s theology. I believe that these three emphases: the glory of God, the authority of Scripture, and the historical-grammatical approach to Scripture are the three legs which support the entire structure of Calvin’s theology.

The Glory of God

The primary aim of John Calvin’s theological efforts was the glory of God. For Calvin, the contemplation of the preeminence of God was the greatest good in the universe. It is so important that without this divine contemplation we cannot even know ourselves. As Calvin stated near the beginning of the *Institutes*, “Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”²² This is true because “. . . what in us seems perfection itself corresponds ill to the purity of God.”²³ Calvin therefore concludes “. . . we must infer that

¹⁹Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 303-304.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 303.

²¹Piper, “The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and his Preaching.”

²²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:37.

²³*Ibid.*, 1:38.

man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty."²⁴ The centrality of God in Calvin's heart and mind is the key to understanding his theology.

The foundational principle for John Calvin was always the glory of God. Everything we know is indissolubly bound to the being of God. For Calvin only two kinds of knowledge exist, "the knowledge of God and of ourselves."²⁵ True knowledge of ourselves can only come when we know God. This principle makes the study of theology not only a divine mandate but a human necessity. Calvin sought to maximize the glory of God in his exposition of the great doctrines of Scripture. The glory of God is revealed "in the whole workmanship of the universe."²⁶ Because of this, "men cannot open their eyes without being compelled to see him. Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory" ²⁷ That God created all things for His glory was for Calvin the hermeneutic principle that pervades all his writings. Creation, election, and justification are all for God's glory. I believe this to be an excellent model in the study of theology. If one must err it would seem to be preferable to err on the side which maximizes God's glory. With that as a guide we will be protected from the tyranny of the modern day humanistic hermeneutic which seeks to interpret the Scriptures in a way that maximizes man's glory.

Calvin's passion for God's glory also influenced his theology in another important way. Doctrines like God's sovereignty, election and justification were always articulated in such

²⁴Ibid., 1:39.

²⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, I:35.

²⁶Ibid., I:52.

²⁷Ibid., I:52.

way that maximized God’s glory. When discussing the doctrine of justification with the Italian cardinal Sadolet, Calvin emphasized what was at stake in Rome’s understanding of this important doctrine. He wrote “You . . . touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. . . . Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, *the glory of Christ is extinguished*.”²⁸ The glory of God was always the root issue for Calvin.

The Authority of Scripture

Another important aspect of Calvin’s theology is his use of Scripture as the sole authority. Scripture rules over the church rather than the church ruling over Scripture. “It is utterly vain, then, to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church that the certainty depends upon church assent.”²⁹ For Calvin, Scripture is authoritative because it has its source in God.³⁰ “Hence, the Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard.”³¹ All other authorities (church tradition and fathers) are subservient to the ultimate authority of Scripture. Although Calvin lived before the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” was used as a way of explaining this, he seemingly would have been very comfortable with subjugating all other authorities to the authority of Scripture. Other authorities are respected as far as they concur with Scripture, but where there is a difference of opinion Scripture rules all other authorities. Calvin quoted extensively in his works from the church fathers, some positively and others negatively,

²⁸Piper, “The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and his Preaching.”

²⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:76.

³⁰David L. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 26.

³¹Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:74.

but they were never enshrined as the final authority in matters of faith and practice. Scripture alone occupied this lofty position in the thought of John Calvin.

Because of Calvin's view of the authority of Scripture, his interpretation of Scripture was also distinct from the medieval Catholic church in that he investigated the writings of the early church fathers in light of Scripture. As John Leith has observed, "Calvin's theology can properly be described primarily as commentary upon Scripture as a whole and secondarily as commentary upon the way the church had read Scripture in its theology and creeds."³² When arguing against Pighius in *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will*, Calvin asserts that the rule of faith is to be sought in the Word of God, in Scripture, in the oracles of God, not in tradition.³³ In the "Prefatory Address to King Francis" at the beginning of the *Institutes*, Calvin demonstrates that "If the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the tide of victory – to put it modestly – would turn to our side."³⁴ He did this by giving ten paragraphs of which each begins with "It was a father who said . . ." or something similar.³⁵ Each of these paragraphs demonstrate an area where the fathers were against the Catholic position and supportive of the Protestant position. But Calvin did not seek to win the contest on the basis of the church fathers, his desire is to submit all teaching to the authority of Scripture. The Catholics, he said, "worship only the faults and errors of the fathers. . . . You might say their only care is to gather dung amid gold."³⁶ Calvin, on the other hand, sought to rest the weight of his arguments on Scripture

³²John H. Leith, "John Calvin - Theologian of the Bible," *Interpretation* 25.3 (1971): 329.

³³Anthony N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 171.

³⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 18.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 19-23.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 18.

because the Church was produced by Scripture.

For if the Christian church was from the beginning founded upon the writings of the prophets and the preaching of the apostles, wherever this doctrine is found, the acceptance of it – without which the church itself would never have existed – must certainly have preceded the church.³⁷

For Calvin, this showed the Scriptures superiority to the church since the Scriptures were chronologically prior to the church. Therefore, Calvin always sought to interpret the fathers in light of the clear meaning of Scripture.

The Historical Grammatical Approach to Scripture

Calvin's interpretation of Scripture set him apart from the medieval Catholic church's allegorical hermeneutic. He is called by many "the father of the historical-grammatical method of biblical study."³⁸ This method "attempts to discover what the Scripture meant to those who wrote it, and what it means according to the common definition of its words and its grammatical intent."³⁹ Calvin believed that the allegorical method of interpretation originated with the devil. It is Satan's attempt to undermine the certainty of biblical teaching. As Calvin commented on Galatians 4:22, "For many centuries no man was thought clever who lacked the cunning and daring to transfigure with subtlety the sacred Word of God. This was undoubtedly a trick of Satan to impair the authority of Scripture and remove any true advantage out of the reading of it."⁴⁰ The conviction that Scripture should be interpreted in its historical and grammatical intent was central to Calvin's approach to theology. This is true because, for Calvin, "Everything was

³⁷Ibid., 75-76.

³⁸Vos, *Exploring Church History*, 93.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 107.

exposition of Scripture. This was the ministry unleashed by seeing the majesty of God in Scripture. The Scripture were absolutely central because they were absolutely the Word of God and had as their self-authenticating theme the majesty and glory of God.”⁴¹ In Book 1 of the *Institutes*, Calvin commented on the danger of falling into error without the Word of God:

If we turn aside from the Word, as I have just now said, though we may strive with strenuous haste, yet, since we have got off the track, we shall never reach the goal. For we should so reason that the splendor of the divine countenance, which even the apostle calls “unapproachable” [I Tim. 6:16], is for us like an inexplicable labyrinth unless we are conducted into it by the thread of the Word; so that it is better to limp along this path than to dash with all speed outside it.⁴²

For Calvin, the only hermeneutically safe road to travel was the road of the authoritative Scriptures.

As stated above, Calvin’s method of interpreting the Scriptures was a substantial break with previous Catholic exegetes. The method of allegory, which was made popular by Origen in the Third Century, was used throughout the Medieval age as a means of interpreting difficult Old Testament passages. Calvin argued that this method had done great damage to the church. In place of this faulty interpretive principle, Calvin proposed a historical, grammatical approach to the Scriptures which modern day exegetes take for granted.⁴³ This approach regarded seriously the historical and literary context of the text in question.⁴⁴ Calvin’s faithful exposition of almost the entire Bible through his commentaries was perhaps his greatest enduring contribution to the church across denominational lines and through the ages.⁴⁵

⁴¹Piper, “The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and his Preaching.”

⁴²Calvin, *Institutes*, 73.

⁴³Vos, *Exploring Church History*, 93.

⁴⁴Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 106.

⁴⁵Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*, 305.

Conclusion

The enduring influence of the theology of John Calvin is a testimony to the solid foundation upon which his theology was based. Theologians today would be well served to begin with the same essential presuppositions with which Calvin began. Passion for the greater glory of God; a historical-grammatical approach to the interpretation of Scripture; and, the authority of Scripture ruling over all other authorities are all necessary components of a Reformed, Evangelical approach to theology. No one exemplified these better than the Reformer from Geneva. For this reason, the study of the life and theology of John Calvin is vital if we are to understand the essence of Reformed theology.

The final edition of the *Institutes* from 1559 is a remarkable testimony to the systematic genius of Calvin, as well as the depth of his knowledge of Scripture. Because it was completed after Calvin had faithfully preached through the entire Bible, it shows a remarkable degree of depth. It was meant by Calvin to be a guide to Scripture, in the tradition of Luther's *Larger Catechism* (1529). In fact, Calvin intentionally modeled the *Institutes* after Luther's catechism.⁴⁶ In the preface to the *Institutes* French edition of 1541, Calvin states that they "could be like a key and an entrance to give access to all the children of God, in order that they might really understand Scripture."⁴⁷ This seems to have been his greatest desire as is evident in the words with which he addressed the pastors of Geneva for the last time.

As concerns my doctrine: I have taught faithfully, and God has given me grace to write. I have done it with the utmost fidelity, and have not to my knowledge corrupted or twisted a single passage of the Scriptures; and when I could have drawn out a far-fetched meaning, if I had studied subtlety, I have put that [temptation] under foot and have always studied simplicity. I have written nothing through hatred against any one, but have always

⁴⁶Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 153.

⁴⁷Ibid.

set before me faithfully what I have thought to be for the glory of God.⁴⁸

This is the heart of a man who was greatly used by God for His glory. May God grant a double portion of this spirit to be poured out upon the pastors of our day.

⁴⁸Leith, "John Calvin – Theologian of the Bible," 329-330.

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