

John Calvin

The Frenchman in Geneva who founded Presbyterianism

By Stephen McDonald

10 July, 2009, was the 500th Anniversary of the birth of John Calvin. He is considered to be one of the greatest theologians and Biblical scholars of church history. His reforms to the church and city of Geneva prompt both admiration and controversy, and his theology remains a dividing point for many.

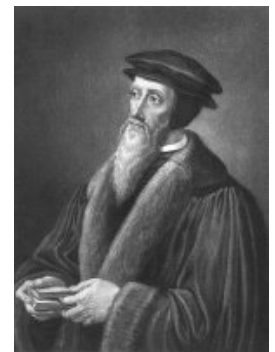
Calvin's influence reached much further than theology and politics. He built Geneva's reputation as a city of learning by building schools and a university, a legacy which has accompanied Reformed theology to many places, including notably to Scotland. He also proposed a different definition of usury, which the Roman Catholic Church had defined as the lending of money at any interest. Calvin taught that money could be lent at interest, as long as the rate charged was in proportion to the expected return. This laid a foundation for modern capitalism (interestingly, Calvin considered interest above 1% to be unreasonable).



John Calvin's Academy in Geneva

Born in Noyon, France, Calvin was 8 years old when Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

Calvin's father Gerard was a lawyer who worked closely with the Roman Catholic Church and managed to secure clerical appointments for his son to pay for his education. In one expression of the then commonplace practice called simony (named after Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8:9-25 who sought to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit), you could buy or somehow convince the bishop to appoint you to a parish or church office. You would then be paid the wage, out of which you would hire a young priest as your assistant to do the actual work, leaving an amount for you to pursue your own endeavours. In Calvin's case, this money was used for his education. Calvin trained in law, first at the University of Paris, later transferring to the University of Bourges.



John Calvin

In 1530, while in Bourges, he was converted and became an active member of the Protestant church. He returned to Paris in 1533, but persecution of Protestants grew after his friend Nicolas Cop, the rector of the College Royal, devoted his inaugural address to denouncing the Roman Catholic Church.

Calvin was thought by some to have written the address and was forced to flee the capital, first going home to Noyon, then to Orléans.



John Calvin in his youth

In 1534 placards started appearing in Paris, Blois, Rouen, Tours and Orleans, criticising the Mass, and Calvin was again forced to flee.

He went to Basel, Switzerland, where he wrote the first edition of his magnum opus *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, published in March 1536 when he was 27. This edition was much shorter than the expanded version available today, which he finished in 1559.

Calvin then worked for a time as secretary to Princess Renée of France in Ferrara, Italy, returning to Paris in June to help his brother wind up their father's affairs. Then in July the Edict of Coucy was issued, giving Protestants 6 months to reconcile to the Roman Catholic Church.

Calvin left France for Strasbourg, Germany, to help the French speaking congregation there. On his way he was to stay overnight in Geneva, but was persuaded by William Farel to remain and help him reform the church there instead. They were both expelled in 1538 and Calvin finally went to Strasbourg, but was invited back to Geneva by the city council in 1541.

Between then and his death in 1564, Calvin preached and wrote prolifically, welcomed in refugees from many nations and trained them to return to reform the church. He continued his work reforming the church and city structures. It should be noted that Calvin was never the ruler of Geneva, although many, not all, of his ideas were adopted by the widely democratic city councils.



St Pierre's Cathedral, Geneva



A reconstruction of the pulpit at St Pierre's Cathedral, from which Calvin preached

One of the most controversial incidents in Calvin's life was the execution of Michael Servetus on charges of heresy.

Servetus denied the Trinity and taught that Jesus did not exist before his birth and was not a separate person. Servetus had already been condemned to death by the Inquisition before coming to Geneva and would have been executed had he simply been turned out of Geneva and into Catholic hands. Calvin did write to the Inquisition when they tried Servetus, but when he came to Geneva, Calvin visited him in gaol on many occasions trying to convince him to repent. When questioned by the Genevan authorities he had to report that Servetus stuck by his teachings, but he was not the judge and did not set the penalty. To his credit, once Servetus was convicted, Calvin petitioned the council against the sentence of burning at the stake in preference for a more humane execution.

Here I'll quote from Kevin De Young's excellent post also noting the 500th Anniversary of Calvin's Birth:

We do the memory of Calvin no disservice to admit that he had weaknesses. He was physically frail and could be emotionally volatile. No one lamented his own weaknesses—physical and spiritual—more than himself. And no one understands general human weakness better than Calvin. The universe of Calvin's thought was one where man was small and God was very big. He had no problem being thought of as dust, or a worm, or grass, because he knew that's what he was compared to the infinite glory, splendor, and holiness of a sovereign God.

Without stealing too much of De Young's thunder, he makes a good case for why Calvin is still remembered 500 years after his birth, his premise being that "his adult life was consumed with one thing: the word of God—the word as a summons to obedience, the word as a blueprint for reform, the word as the foundation for all truth." De Young helps to put Calvin, and each of us, into perspective when he closes by quoting Isaiah 40:6-8,

A voice say, Cry out. And I said, What shall I cry? All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

For a more detailed account of Calvin's life, including the reforms and opposition in Geneva, I recommend John Calvin: Revolutionary, Theologian, Pastor by Williston Walker (previously published as John Calvin: The Organiser of Reformed Protestantism, 1509-1564). You can also get your hands on a downloadable copy of T.H.L. Parker's Portrait of Calvin from DesiringGod.org. It comes with high praise from Ligon Duncan, although with a couple of caveats.



William Farel, John Calvin, Theodore Beza and John Knox in sculpture on the Reformation Wall at the University of Geneva, built in 1909 to commemorate the 400th Anniversary of John Calvin's birth and the 350th Anniversary of the establishment of the University.

For an overview of Calvin's theology, try Dr C. Matthew McMahon's Condensed Summary of the Institutes of the Christian Religion.

For a broader look at the reach of Calvin's teaching, read Living for God's Glory: An Introduction to Calvinism by Joel R. Beeke and Lectures on Calvinism by Abraham Kuyper.

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