

John Calvin

I. Career of John Calvin

A. Views of Calvin

1. Dictator of Geneva
2. Systematizer of predestination
3. Enemy of evangelism
4. Man who burned Servetus
5. “Pope of the Protestants” (Voltaire)
6. Model: “The longer I live the clearer does it appear that John Calvin’s system is the nearest to perfection” (C. H. Spurgeon)
7. “The Theologian” (Melanchthon)

B. Background

1. Born and reared in France
2. Legal and humanist education
3. Time of conversion unknown
4. Fled France after crackdown on Protestants
5. Published first edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536)
6. Goes to Geneva (1536) → Center of his life’s work
 - a. Reforms & reorganizes church government and worship
 - b. Not a dictatorial theocracy
 - c. City became “most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles” (Knox) → the “Protestant Rome”
7. Published final edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559)
8. Died 1564 (end of “First Reformation”?)

II. Theology of John Calvin

A. Scripture

1. Calvin’s Use of Scripture
 - a. His commentaries—the real basis of his work; the research and exegesis involved here laid the basis for his work and theology.
 - 1) Calvin was a *biblical, exegetical theologian*, not a systematic theologian building everything around predestination and the sovereignty of God
 - 2) Followed the grammatical-historical method (using all means to understand and explain the author’s meaning)
 - b. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first comprehensive Protestant theology and still highly influential; an exegetically based work
 - c. Distribution of Scripture
 - 1) Calvin promoted the translation and publishing of the Bible (although not a translator himself)
 - 2) Examples
 - a) Promoted first Protestant French Bible translation by Pierre Olivetan
 - b) Geneva Bible, although not Calvin’s own work, owed its genesis to the Marian exiles who came to Geneva under his influence
2. Nature of Scripture
 - a. God’s accommodation
 - 1) God reveals Himself in a manner we can comprehend
 - 2) God “lisps” to us as a nurse lisps to a child

- b. Holy Spirit authenticates Scripture
 - 1) Despite humanist background, Calvin had less confidence in philosophy than Erasmus or even Zwingli
 - 2) Not through evidences but the inner witness of the Spirit one knows the Bible is the Word of God
 - c. Inerrancy
 - 1) As w/ Luther, Calvin often cited by both sides in the inerrancy debate
 - 2) Rogers-McKim thesis: Inerrancy “invented” by Princeton Theologians
 - 3) Calvin often uses “inerrantist” language
- B. Salvation
- 1. Sovereignty of God
 - a. *Not* a selected starting point for systematic theology
 - b. Rather, set forth as a dominant theological theme from Scripture
 - 2. Salvation is unifying theme of Scripture in Calvin (as w/ later Covenant Theology)
 - a. Christ emphasized in His role as redeemer
 - b. Predestination is discussed in the *Institutes* not in connection with providence but with soteriology.
 - 3. Predestination
 - a. Considerations
 - 1) Calvin not anti-evangelism
 - 2) Not fatalism because there is a personal God
 - 3) Created a heroism/courage
 - b. Aspects of Calvin’s View (from George)
 - 1) Absolute—unconditional, based on God’s sovereign will
 - 2) Particular—aimed at individuals, not just groups
 - 3) Double—involves election & reprobation (or preterition), “a horrible decree”
 - c. Steered between fatalism and Deism (George)
 - 4. Salvation applied
 - a. Substitutionary atonement
 - 1) Passive obedience: Christ’s suffering (passion)
 - 2) Active obedience: Christ’s complete obedience to the law
 - b. Through the preaching of the gospel
 - 1) Distinction between general call (proclamation to all) and effectual call (message taken to the hearts of the elect by the Spirit)
 - 2) Distinction between revealed will (“God is not willing that any should perish”) and hidden will (where election is determined)
 - c. Limited atonement? Surprisingly debated in Calvin
- C. The Church
- 1. Marks of a true church
 - a. The gospel rightly preached
 - b. The sacraments rightly administered
 - c. Church discipline rightly practiced
 - 1) Debated whether third point is found in Calvin
 - 2) Found, however, in Bucer and John Knox
 - 2. Visible and invisible church

- a. Distinction, suggested earlier (Augustine, Wycliffe, etc.), becomes explicit and developed in Calvin
- b. Thought the visible church to be a “mixed multitude”
- 3. Sacraments
 - a. Infant baptism as a sign of the covenant
 - b. “Spiritual presence” in the Lord’s Supper
 - 1) Not a physical eating of Christ but more than a memorial
 - 2) A “spiritual feasting”
- 4. Church government
 - a. A “representative” presbyterial polity
 - 1) “Bottom-up” flow of power
 - 2) Equality of officers
 - b. Offices
 - 1) Elders (teaching/ruling)—spiritual oversight of the church
 - 2) Deacons—oversight of the temporal affairs
- D. Church and State
 - 1. Calvin: Church an independent body, advising the state but not controlled by it
 - 2. Religious Liberty
 - a. Did not believe in modern concept of religious liberty
 - b. Servetus Affair
 - 1) Commonly the most condemned act of Calvin’s career
 - 2) Not unique: Servetus would have been executed anywhere in Europe
 - 3. Calvin’s system did represent a step forward, however, in democratic government, if not strictly in religious liberty.
 - a. His republican (“presbyterian”) system of church government corrected abuses and brought greater equity to not only the church but also the state he influenced.
 - b. Ideas influencing republican govt. (W. Stanford Reid)
 - 1) Belief in the rule of law
 - 2) Preference for elected magistrates
 - 3) Right of lower magistrates to resist tyranny of higher officials.
 - 4. Right of rebellion
 - a. Loath to condone any rebellion to ordained authorities [seen in his correspondence with John Knox]
 - b. Idea of resistance of the “lower magistrates”
- E. The Christian and Culture
 - 1. “Christ the transformer of culture”
 - a. Christians must redeem and transform all legitimate culture and bring it into conformity to Christ.
 - b. E.g., postmillennialism, the kingdom of God coming to earth
 - 2. Cultural Mandate
 - a. This phrase has been popularized by the “Dutch school” (Abraham Kuyper, et al.) and embraced by many evangelical thinkers.
 - b. This idea appeals to the “mandate” God gave humanity to subdue and redeem culture (Gen. 1:26, 28; 9:1-2).
 - 3. But note Calvin not postmillennial nor advocate of cultural mandate
 - 4. Source of modern discussions of Christian/biblical worldview

5. Example: Calvinistic tenets supporting capitalism?
 - a. Holiness of all vocations
 - b. Nobility of labor (“Protestant work ethic”)
 - c. Permitting the charging of interest
 - d. General approval of frugality

III. Theologians Around Calvin

A. Martin Bucer

1. Mentor to Calvin
2. Active in Strasbourg
3. “Father of Reformed Ecclesiology”
 - a. Three marks of the true church
 - b. Tried to bridge magisterial & radical reformation
 - 1) Instruction through catechism & confession
 - 2) Public profession of faith (confirmation)
 - 3) Admonition by all believers under elders
 - 4) Congregation as court for church discipline
4. Later professor at Cambridge: Forerunner of Puritanism?

B. John Knox

1. Disciple of Calvin
2. Radical in opposition to Catholicism
3. Reformer of Scotland
 - a. Attempt at a reformed society
 - b. Development of Presbyterianism
4. Political ideas
 - a. Pressed right of rebellion further than Calvin
 - b. Opposed concept of women rulers

C. Theodore Beza

1. Successor to Calvin
2. Part of Protestant Scholasticism—discussed later