

Faith Story: John Calvin

We Presbyterians, along with all Protestants, are greatly indebted to John Calvin for the theology which guides us, but I don't know that any of us would much want to have dinner with the man.

He was undeniably intelligent, faithful, effective. He was also reportedly personally impatient, unkind, and humorless.



Certainly, the generations of Calvinist preachers and theologians who have taken Calvin's biblical interpretations and church ideas to some grim and dour extremes have done much to convince us that Calvin himself was grim and dour, but that is not an accurate reflection of this complicated man or of his theology of God's sovereignty and grace.

John Calvin was born in 1509 into a middle-class Catholic family in France. His father worked as a lay administrator in service to the local bishop and intended John to have a career in the church, sending him to the University of Paris when he was 14 to be educated for the priesthood. Before John completed his studies, his father became embroiled in a quarrel with church authorities and abruptly decided that John would train for the law rather than the church.

During his years of study, Calvin was exposed to Renaissance humanism, the radical student movement of the time. The concepts of humanism, especially its emphasis that salvation is by grace rather than the result of good works and ceremonies, inspired Calvin to study Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, the three languages of ancient Christian discourse, so that he could engage in serious Scripture study.

It's not clear when Calvin converted from Catholicism to Protestantism, but in 1533, he was suspected of having collaborated in the preparation of a sermon which advocated for some of Martin Luther's ideas. Forced to flee Catholic France, Calvin traveled to Basel, Switzerland, where, three years later, at the age of 27, he published the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which remains a central document of Reformed theology, still influential and important to the Reformed church.

Soon after, Calvin made plans to go to Strasbourg, where he hoped to live a quiet life as a scholar, assisting in the Reformation movement with his writings. But fighting between local rulers complicated the journey and Calvin detoured to Geneva, intending to spend one night there.

Calvin's fame as author of the *Institutes* had preceded him and William Farel, a Reformer working in Geneva, asked him to stay and assist in making the city officially Protestant. Calvin resisted until Farel swore a great oath that God would curse all Calvin's studies unless he stayed in Geneva. Calvin later wrote of that moment: "I felt as if God from heaven had laid his mighty hand upon me to stop me in my course -- and I was so terror-stricken that I did not continue my journey."

Calvin and Farel tried to implement the pious and austere practices of Reformed thinking in Geneva, a city known for its flagrant sin. Things deteriorated quickly and eventually they were both banished from the city. Calvin headed -- at last -- to Strasbourg, where he spent three years pastoring 500 fellow French religious refugees, along with continuing his theological writings.

In 1541, at the invitation of the City Council, Calvin returned to Geneva, where he remained for the rest of his life, teaching and modeling that Scripture is to be the authority for every part of ministry and creating a government founded on and guided by religious principles and priorities.

Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* governed both church and city in Geneva. There were four groups of church officers: pastors and teachers to preach and explain the Scriptures; elders from the congregation to administer the church; and deacons to attend to charitable responsibilities. A consistory of pastors and elders was tasked with bringing all aspects of Genevan life into conformity with God's law. Under Calvin's leadership, Geneva became the center of Protestantism and the place where pastors were trained, equipped, and sent out to the rest of Europe. John Knox, founder of the Presbyterian Church, was one of those who studied under Calvin in Geneva, and he said of the experience that Geneva was "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the apostles." While in Geneva, Knox worked with Calvin and others on a translation of Scripture. This Geneva Bible was the first with chapter and verse numbers and it was the first to include study notes in the margins.

Calvin had married while in Strasbourg, but all his children died in infancy and his wife died in 1549 after a lengthy illness. Calvin himself suffered from chronic pain, breathing difficulty, headaches, and severe weight loss. Even years before his death, he was described as "a skeleton covered with skin." Despite all this, he continued preaching, teaching, writing, providing pastoral care and civic leadership. When he was too weak to walk, he was carried to the church in a chair so he could preach. On his deathbed, he completed his final Bible commentary, on the book of Joshua.

Calvin died on May 27, 1564 -- two weeks before his 55th birthday. At his request, he was buried in an unmarked grave at an undisclosed location in Geneva and, to this day, his burial spot remains unknown.

I said a moment ago that the general opinion of Calvin tends to be that he was grim and austere and harsh; a hard man espousing a hard theology of judgment that presents a God eternally angry over human sin and instantly ready to consign sinners to eternal damnation. We often know just enough about Calvin's writings about predestination to think that's all he wrote about; and we recoil from a doctrine that seems so at odds with the concept of God as love. But, in truth, the issue of predestination is not of central importance to Calvin's theology, which is founded upon his unshakeable conviction that God's sovereignty is enacted in grace. He considered predestination a comforting doctrine, insofar as it communicates that our salvation is in the care of a loving and utterly reliable God and is not in any degree dependent upon human effort. We can see the heart of Calvin's theology in his definition of Christian faith:

Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the feely-given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

John Calvin, the father of our Reformed faith, has left us a great legacy through the witness of his thinking, his writing, and his life.

Works Consulted:

- Christopher Elwood: *Calvin for Armchair Theologians*; 2002
- *Dangerous Prayers: 50 Powerful Prayers that Changed the World*; published by Thomas Nelson; p. 36-39
- *131 Christians Everyone Should Know*; compiled by the Editors of *Christian History Magazine*; p. 37-40.
- *Prayers from the Reformed Tradition*; compiled by Diane Karay Tripp
- Biography website; www.biography.com
- Britannica website; www.britannica.com
- Reasonable Theology website: <https://reasonabletheology.org>