

JOHN CALVIN

PILGRIM AND PASTOR



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John Calvin: Pilgrim and Pastor

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INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CALVIN

July 10, 2009 marks the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin (1509–1564). Today for many people the name of Calvin is known only in a vague sense and has become a label for attitudes that are negative, judgmental, and joyless. Historians, by contrast, know that John Calvin was one of the most remarkable men who lived in the last five hundred years and that his influence on the development of the modern western world has been immense. Calvin and Calvinism have been linked to the rise of such diverse phenomena as democracy, capitalism, and modern science. Theologians and biblical scholars know him as a writer in theology and biblical studies whose work must still be carefully considered today. Church historians remember him as the principal theologian of Reformed Christianity—an expression of the Christian faith that over four and a half centuries has attracted millions of adherents in countries throughout the world. He was indeed a leader and writer whose work affected the life and worship of countless congregations and has inspired thousands of pastors, theologians, and biblical scholars.

The life and work of John Calvin have always been controversial as well as influential. Some have loved him, and some have hated him. All would agree that he was a man with a brilliant mind and a powerful will who had a profound impact on the development of western civilization. But was that impact positive or negative?

His critics have been many. In his own day they sometimes railed at him—naming their dogs after him—and sometimes laughed at

him, some suggesting that his wife died of boredom. Some modern critics have been savage. Will Durant wrote, “. . . we shall always find it hard to love the man who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense.”¹

On the positive side, Calvin’s friend and colleague Theodore Beza (1519–1605) wrote a brief biography of Calvin to answer the critics of his day. Beza’s admiring work breathes a spirit of affection and warmth, observing that “in the common intercourse of life, there was no man who was more pleasant.”² He concluded his biography, “Having been a spectator of his conduct for sixteen years . . . I can now declare, that in him all men may see a most beautiful example of the Christian character, an example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate.”³

The real Calvin was not in the first place a man who lived to influence future generations. Rather he was a spiritual pilgrim finding anew the apostolic Christianity expressed in the Bible and serving as a faithful minister of that Word in the church of his day. The influence that Calvin would have regarded as most important was as a purifier of the Christian religion and a reformer of the church for his day. The essential Calvin was a pilgrim and pastor. From that reality all his influence flowed.

Calvin saw the importance of his life as a pastor in his own day and did not focus on his influence in years to come. When his friend William Farel urged him to publish his study of Genesis, he replied, “As to my observations on Genesis, if the Lord shall grant me longer life and leisure, perhaps I will set myself about that work, although I do not expect to have many hearers. This is my especial end and aim, to serve my generation; and for the rest, if, in my present calling, an occasional opportunity offers itself, I shall endeavor to improve it for those who come after us. I have a mind to set about writing several things, but as my wife

¹Will Durant, *The Reformation (The Story of Civilization, Part VI)*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957), 490.

²Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Vol. 1, ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), xcivii.

³Beza, in *ibid.*, c.

is now in ill health, not without danger, my attention is otherwise engaged.”⁴

In his own day he was above all else a pastor who had a passion for the gospel of Christ. It was that gospel and that passion that ultimately moved millions. He communicated faith, hope, and confidence in God. A Roman Catholic Spanish soldier in the Netherlands observed some years after Calvin’s death that he would rather face a whole army than one Calvinist convinced he was doing the will of God. Reformed Christianity was not a mild and innocuous religion. It was moving and powerful.

This book is an introduction to the life and thought of John Calvin. It aims at communicating Calvin’s passion and faith through extensive quotations from his works so that something of the force and eloquence of his language can be experienced by the reader.⁵ He moved millions not through the power of his personality but through the power of his biblical ideas and words. This book focuses on the essential Calvin, a man who lived out his Christian faith as a pilgrim and a pastor.

⁴John Calvin, “Letters,” July 28, 1542, in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Vol. 4, ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 339.

⁵In order to make Calvin’s eloquence clearer to the contemporary reader, quotations from his commentaries and treatises have often been modernized.

CALVIN IN STRASSBURG

On July 10, 1539 John Calvin reached his thirtieth birthday. In many ways his future did not seem very promising. He had shown his intelligence and scholarship in two books he had written, but his life had been very troubled. He had fled from his native France after his conversion to the Protestant faith and had ended up in the Swiss city of Geneva. After less than two years of pastoral service there, he was exiled from Geneva along with other ministers because of their insistence on moral discipline in the church. A discouraged and embittered Calvin traveled to Strassburg, an independent, German-speaking city-state in the Holy Roman Empire near the border with France. There he became the pastor of a small congregation of a few hundred French refugees. Calvin's years in Strassburg were a relief for him as he enjoyed a less conspicuous life than he'd had in Geneva, pastoring, studying, and writing. At the age of thirty, in his second exile, his body was beginning to show its tendency for weakness and illness. (In fact he had less than twenty-five years to live.) No one could have predicted that from these modest and uncertain circumstances Calvin would rise to be one of the most influential men of his age and of the modern era.

Yet 1539 was a turning point for Calvin. In that year he completed the first of his commentaries on books of the Bible, a commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans. He also published the first major revision of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, moving it from being an introduction to basic Christianity

toward being a full systematic theology. Both of these works pointed to his developing interests and insights. But a third work that he wrote that year is the most important as an introduction to the life and thought of Calvin. This work is his famous treatise known as “Reply to Sadoleto.”

Calvin’s treatise was a response to a sharp attack on the Reformation written by Jacopo Sadoleto. Sadoleto was a bishop and cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and a distinguished scholar. After hearing of the exile of Calvin and other pastors, he wrote to the Genevans in 1538 urging them to return to the old church. While the Genevan authorities did not regard Sadoleto’s letter as a real threat to the Protestant establishment in Geneva, they did want a strong and effective response written to it. After careful consideration they finally realized that their former pastor Calvin, whom they had exiled, was the best equipped to write the answer they wanted.

Calvin must have received their request with some amusement and satisfaction. Their recognition that they needed him surely made Calvin feel vindicated. He saw the importance of the task and quickly set to work writing his “Reply to Sadoleto.” He completed the treatise in six days. Theodore Beza wrote that the work was full of “truth and eloquence.”¹ More recent scholars have evaluated the treatise as one of the most powerful defenses of the Reformation ever written.

Calvin’s “Reply to Sadoleto” is important for more than its brilliant defense of Reformed Christianity. It is also a window into Calvin’s soul. Calvin was usually very reticent to write much about himself, but in this work there is a remarkable personal quality that reveals a great deal about him.

By nature Calvin was a very private person. In few of his works does he write about himself. Even in his letters he does not become introspective or discuss the events of his personal life in much detail. But in “Reply to Sadoleto” he reveals indirectly a

¹Theodore Beza, *The Life of John Calvin*, in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Vol. 1, ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), xxxv.

good deal of his own experience of the Reformation and the key motivations of his life. These experiences and convictions of his life are also key elements of the religion he taught as a pastor.

The character of Sadoleto's appeal to the Genevans provided several incentives for Calvin to show something of his own experience in his reply. First, Sadoleto made a very personal attack on Calvin and the other ministers, saying that they had been motivated in their reforming work only by a desire for fame and money. Second, Sadoleto argued that only the Roman Catholic Church possessed truth, certainty, and salvation—issues of deep personal significance for Calvin. Third, Sadoleto had created several prayers in his treatise that he had put in the mouths of an imagined person to illustrate some of the points he was making. These prayers written in the first person evoked from Calvin a response written in the same language. This literary device was well known to Calvin who was acquainted with it from the writings of Quintilian, the ancient teacher of rhetoric, and had been commented on by Calvin in his early commentary on Seneca:

. . . *prosopopoeia*, by which it is pretended that the emperor is talking with himself, and so to speak entering into meditation. . . . And these words are more appealing through a pretended person, than if conceived as from the person of the author. So Quintilian [*Institutes of Oratory*, 9.2.29] teaches. For they are effective to arouse the reader, to stir feelings, to vary the discourse. Some call this figure not *prosopopoeia* but *ethopoea*, because the former invents persons who nowhere exist, whereas the latter fits these words to definite persons.²

Calvin was not being intentionally autobiographical with these prayers, but they inevitably reflected something of his own personal experience of spiritual things.

Calvin's "Reply" began with a vigorous rejection of the idea that he was motivated by a desire for fame or money. He could more easily have found those in the Church of Rome. What

²John Calvin, *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, trans. F.L. Battles and A.M. Hugo (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 29.

motivated him, he insisted, above all was a concern for the glory of God. Where Sadoletto had declared that the Christian should first be concerned for his own salvation, Calvin maintained that the Christian must first be focused on God and his glory: "It is not very sound theology to confine a man's thoughts so much to himself, and not to set before him, as the prime motive of his existence, zeal to show forth the glory of God. For we are born first of all for God, and not for ourselves."³ Calvin always intended his life and thought to be God-centered.

For Calvin, once the Christian saw the glory of God as central, then a proper discussion of salvation could follow. Only when we see God as truly glorious can we see the true nature of salvation and its importance. He wrote to Sadoletto, "... you have a theology that is too lazy, as is almost always the case with those who have had no experience in serious struggles of conscience."⁴ Laziness and self-indulgence are not the path to true theology. Calvin believed that such attitudes had dominated the old church in which he had been raised and produced a church life filled with formalism, indifference, and superstition.

Calvin's criticism of Sadoletto at this point certainly implied that he himself had had serious struggles of conscience. What kinds of struggles? We can see echoes of those experiences in Calvin's discussions of justification. He had struggled with the great question of how to be right with God. Calvin stressed that a correct understanding of justification was fundamental. He wrote to Sadoletto that justification was "the first and keenest subject of controversy between us."⁵

Calvin presents his thought on justification in his "Reply" in terms of several steps. The first was self-examination. The sinner must come to recognize his own plight: "First, we tell a man to begin by examining himself. He must not do this in a superficial or perfunctory way, but must call his conscience before the

³John Calvin, "Reply to Sadoletto," *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Vol. 1, ed. H. Beveridge and J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 33, translation altered.

⁴*Ibid.*, 52, translation altered.

⁵*Ibid.*, 41.

judgment seat of God. When he is sufficiently convinced of his iniquity, then he must reflect on the strictness of the judgment pronounced on all sinners. When thus confronted and amazed at his misery, then he prostrates and humbles himself before God. He casts away all self-confidence and groans as if given up for final destruction.”⁶ The conscience of the sinner must come to see profoundly his lostness and helplessness. Calvin made this same point in his *Institutes*: “. . . no man can descend into himself and seriously consider his own character, without perceiving that God is angry with him and hostile to him.”⁷

This theme of very serious and searching self-examination was not an incidental matter for Calvin. Rather it was absolutely central to Reformation theology and spirituality. In many ways the Reformation was born out of the sense of the hopelessness and spiritual powerlessness of sinners. For Calvin the complete lostness of man was not only a teaching of the Bible and of all sound theology since the days of the church father Augustine (354–430)—it was also part of his own experience. Scattered throughout the “Reply” are indications that Calvin had personally struggled with his own sin and the terrible judgment that awaited him apart from Christ.

Calvin preserved something of this struggle before coming to faith in his final edition of the *Institutes* in the very first section of the first chapter: “. . . every one, therefore, must be so impressed with a consciousness of his own unhappiness as to arrive at some knowledge of God. Thus a sense of our own ignorance, vanity, infirmity, depravity, and corruption, leads us to perceive and acknowledge that in the Lord alone are to be found true wisdom, solid strength, perfect goodness, and unspotted righteousness.”⁸

For example, in the “Reply” Calvin elaborates on this theme of struggle in one of the prayers he puts in the mouth of his average Christian: “I expected a future resurrection, but hated to think of

⁶Ibid., translation altered.

⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1816), II, 16, 1.

⁸Ibid., I, 1, 1, altered.

it, since it would be a most dreadful event. And this feeling not only had dominion over me in private, but had its origin in the doctrine that was then everywhere delivered to the people by their Christian teachers.”⁹ Further the prayer speaks of efforts to satisfy God with works of righteousness: “When, however, I had performed all these things, though I had some intervals of quiet, I was still far-off from true peace of conscience; for, whenever I descended into myself, or raised my mind to you, O God, extreme terror seized me—terror which no expiations or satisfactions could cure. And the more closely I examined myself, the sharper the stings with which my conscience was pricked, so that the only solace which remained to me was to delude myself by forgetfulness.”¹⁰

Although these prayers are not strictly autobiographical, they are so intense and personal that they must reflect something of Calvin’s experiences in his own conversion only six or seven years earlier. He had come to see for himself his desperate condition and had come to see it as essential for all sound theology and religious experience.

To Sadoletto Calvin insisted that after this self-knowledge the next necessity was a knowledge of God’s way of salvation. The sinner could hope only in God and his work since the work of man is utterly futile. Again Calvin puts words in the mouth of his representative Christian: “I was exceedingly alarmed at the misery into which I had fallen, and much more alarmed at the eternal death that threatened me. As in duty bound, I made it my first business to find your way, condemning my past life, but with groans and tears.”¹¹ That way of God is the way of Christ. A knowledge of the work of Christ as God’s way of salvation is the second step of justification. Calvin, writing as a pastor and teacher, said, “Then we show that the only haven of safety is in the mercy of God, as shown in Christ. In him every part of our salvation is complete.”¹²

⁹Calvin, “Reply to Sadoletto,” 61, translation altered.

¹⁰Ibid., 62, translation altered.

¹¹Ibid., 64, translation altered.

¹²Ibid., 42, translation altered.

For Calvin, Christ displayed all the promises of God concerning the Savior who would fully bear the sins of his people on the cross and impute the saving benefits of his work to them. These promises brought salvation to the sinner when they were received through faith alone. Faith was the link between Christ and the sinner. “Paul, whenever he attributed to faith the power of justifying, restricted it to a free promise of the divine favor, and keeps it far removed from all works.”¹³ Faith rests alone in the promise of salvation in Jesus.

Calvin showed Sadoletto that the result of the faith that rests in the justifying work of Christ is great peace and assurance for the Christian. “He has nothing of Christ, then, who does not hold this basic principle, that it is God alone who enlightens our minds to perceive his truth, who seals it on our hearts by his Spirit and who by his sure witness confirms it to our conscience. This is, if I may so express it, that full and firm assurance commended by Paul.”¹⁴ Calvin stresses the “confident hope of salvation both commanded by your Word, and founded on it.”¹⁵ Struggles of conscience drove Calvin to faith in Christ, and that faith brought a settled assurance and confidence to his soul.

Calvin challenged not only Sadoletto’s understanding of the way of salvation, but also of the final authority on matters of religion. They both knew that the issue of authority was foundational to the religious and doctrinal disputes of the Reformation era. For Sadoletto, sound doctrine came from the absolute teaching authority of the inerrant Roman Church. As part of that authority he claimed the Holy Spirit, the church, the universal councils, and his ancestors as the basis of the doctrine that he followed.

How did Calvin approach the issue of authority in answering Sadoletto? He began by recognizing the need for an absolute authority that stands above anything doubtful or human: “Christian faith must not be founded on human testimony, not

¹³*Ibid.*, 42f., translation altered.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 53, translation altered.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 57, translation altered.

propped up by doubtful opinion, not resting on human authority, but graven on our hearts by the finger of the living God, so as not to be obliterated by any coloring of error.”¹⁶ Authority must be sought from God alone and the means that he uses.

For Calvin, Christians could only find this certain authority in the Scriptures. He fully embraced the *sola Scriptura* standard of the Reformation and eloquently presented it. The Word of God alone contains certain truth and clear direction for faith: “We hold that the Word of God alone lies beyond the sphere of our judgment.” All other claims to authority must be evaluated by the Scriptures. He insisted that “. . . Fathers and Councils are of authority only in so far as they agree with the rule of the Word.”¹⁷ The Scriptures stand as the judge of the church and all human thought.

Calvin did not treat the authority of Scripture simply as a sparring point with Sadoletto. The Bible was at the heart of the life and experience of the Christian community. Calvin had personally wrestled with the question of authority. He was long attached to the authority of the church and only in his conversion accepted the authority of the Scriptures in all religious matters.

For Calvin, a faithful pastor could only nourish and develop the people of God with the Word. Calvin asked those who would call themselves pastors and teachers to examine themselves on this point: “I will only exhort these men to turn for once to themselves, and consider with what faithfulness they feed the Christian people, who cannot have any other food than the Word of their God.”¹⁸ Calvin lived his life as a pastor who sought to nourish and guide both himself and his flock with the Scriptures.

Calvin did not dismiss Sadoletto’s concern for the authority of the church in a cavalier or individualistic fashion. He made clear that he loved the unity and harmony of the church. But that church must honor the Word of God above itself. “May ours be the humility which, beginning with the lowest, and paying

¹⁶Ibid., 53, translation altered.

¹⁷Ibid., 66, translation altered.

¹⁸Ibid., 65, translation altered.

respect to each in his degree, yields the highest honor and respect to the Church, in subordination, however, to Christ, the Church's head. May ours be the obedience which, while it disposes us to listen to our elders and superiors, tests all obedience by the Word of God. Last, may ours be the Church whose supreme care it is humbly and religiously to venerate the Word of God, and submit to its authority."¹⁹ In this same vein, he presents a prayer: "My conscience told me how strong the zeal was with which I burned for the unity of your Church, provided your truth were made the bond of harmony."²⁰ The Word must be the power of life and peace within the church. True unity and peace are in the truth of the Scriptures.

Calvin acknowledged that asserting the authority of the Word was not a simple solution to all problems. The Word itself was sometimes misunderstood. But whatever the problem or difficulty, the Word was a better and clearer and safer guide than some supposed inerrancy in the church. He has the Christian in his "Reply" pray: ". . . the only thing I asked was that all controversies should be decided by your Word."²¹

For Calvin the Holy Spirit taught the truth of justification through the Scriptures in the church. Calvin's great concerns for justification, the Word of God, and the church were united and energized by his belief in the Holy Spirit. For this reason he reacted sharply to Sadoletto's improper appeal to the Spirit as a guide for the church apart from the Word. "The Spirit was promised not to reveal a new doctrine, but to impress the truth of the gospel on our minds. . . . And you, Sadoletto, by stumbling on the very threshold [of theology], have paid the penalty of that offense which you offered to the Holy Spirit when you separated him from the Word. . . . The Spirit goes before the Church, to enlighten her in understanding the Word, while the Word itself is like the Lydian stone [a touchstone], by which she tests all doctrines."²²

¹⁹Ibid., 50, translation altered.

²⁰Ibid., 60, translation altered.

²¹Ibid., translation altered.

²²Ibid., 36ff., translation altered.

Only the Spirit could open the eyes of Christians, including leaders of the church, to the truth of God's Word.

Calvin's "Reply" in 1539 was shaped by his passion for the glory of God and by the peace with God that he had experienced in Christ after his recognition of the seriousness of his sin. He was convinced that only through the Bible and the work of the Holy Spirit had he come to know this peace in Christ. He was certain that the old church had gravely distorted the truth and needed thorough reform.

These certainties that guided the life and work of John Calvin developed out of his own experience. They met needs in his life that were theological but were also deeply personal. For him personally his struggles of conscience were relieved by the certainty of the gospel of grace. Theologically the certain church of the Middle Ages was replaced by the certain Scripture of the Reformation. These certainties to which Calvin had come gave him a clear focus amidst the anxieties and changes of his life. One scholar called Calvin "a singularly anxious man."²³ While such a statement may be somewhat exaggerated, Calvin did have anxieties that emerged both from his personal experiences and from the rapid changes that society was undergoing in the sixteenth century. In response to these anxieties Calvin found great certainties in religion reformed by the Bible. Those certainties brought a stability to his life that is reflected in the clarity of his thought and his great productivity as pastor and theologian. Calvin lived out the faith about which he had written to Sadoletto, a faith that was "that full and firm assurance commended by Paul, which leaves no room for doubt, and does not hesitate and waver among human arguments about which party to join. Rather it maintains its consistency though the whole world oppose it."²⁴

²³William J. Bouwsma, "The Quest for the Historical Calvin," *Archiv fuer Reformationsgeschichte*, 77 (1986), 53.

²⁴Calvin, "Reply to Sadoletto," 53, translation altered.