

CALVIN AT SCHOOL

by Douglas Wilson, New Saint Andrews College • Medieval History and Literature Series

OUTLINE OF HIS LIFE

John Calvin was born in France in 1509. He was brought up in a devout Catholic family, and was probably well-educated as a boy. He left home to study for the priesthood in Paris at the tender age of 14, but a few years later his father changed his mind about John's future, and so he transferred to Orleans in order to study law. While still a Catholic, he did come under the influence of some reform-minded individuals.

Calvin was probably converted in 1533, and published his famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion* just three years later, in 1536. He was a young man, and a very young Christian when the *Institutes* were first published. But Calvin was brilliant, and his writing was lucid, and that, then as now, was a rare combination. His book became an instant bestseller. The original form of it was much smaller than the two volumes one might purchase today, and this was because he continually revised and expanded it throughout his life.

Because of his commitment to the new Reformed approach to the Christian faith, Calvin was on the run. Francis I of France and the emperor Charles V were at war, and this resulted in Calvin taking a different

route than what he had originally planned. He stopped in Geneva, Switzerland to spend the night, and a local minister of a Protestant persuasion—William Farel—heard that the celebrity theologian was spending the night there. He came by and threatened Calvin with God's judgment if he didn't remain in Geneva in order to help with the ministry. We don't know precisely what Farel said, but it was apparently enough to curl Calvin's hair.

Calvin labored there for a few years, and was then exiled as the result of a showdown with the city fathers. He spent his exile in Strasbourg, where he came under the influence of another Reformer named Martin Bucer. It was also in Strasbourg that he met and married his wife Idelette. In 1541, he was called back to Geneva—and resumed preaching from the verse where he had left off—and he worked faithfully there until his death in 1564. He arranged to be buried in an unmarked tomb so that there would be no venerating foolishness.

SIGNIFICANCE

We know that Calvin had a great deal of influence because there are many thousands of people today who

Douglas Wilson is the minister of Christ Church in Moscow, Idaho. He is a founding board member of both Logos School and New Saint Andrews College, and serves as an instructor at Greyfriars Hall, a ministerial training program at Christ Church. He is the author of numerous books on classical Christian education, the family, and the Reformed faith.

identify themselves as “Calvinists.” But what does that even mean? In the 16th century, the label would *not* have tagged someone as being a predestinarian—virtually all the Protestants, including Luther, were that. In the first century after the Reformation, the name would likely have referred to Calvin’s view of the sacraments. But today most Protestants are not predestinarians, and it has come about that those who are in that position carry the name of Calvinist. But whatever the case, it should be easy to see that someone who has his name used as shorthand so much is a force to be reckoned with.

Whatever we think of the theology of Karl Barth (which in my case is not much), I think we can agree that he was in a position to recognize theological genius when he ran into it. And he had this to say about Calvin: “Calvin is a cataract, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something directly down from Himalaya, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological.” It might be hard to tell on the first reading, but these are words of high praise.

Calvin was French, and discharged most of his ministry in Switzerland. But it has to be said that his most profound influence has been in the English-speaking world. This happened through the agency of a man named John Knox. When Bloody Mary came to the throne in England, a number of theological refugees came to Geneva, and came under Calvin’s spell there. John Knox was the pastor of the English-speaking congregation in Geneva. When the thankfully brief reign of Mary ended with her death, she was succeeded by Elizabeth I and the refugees returned, with Knox going to Scotland. The ideas of Calvin took deep root there, in both theology and polity, and from Scotland those ideas spread around the world, most notably to the American colonies.

Calvin made great theological contributions in different areas. For example, we should take note of his view of the sacraments, his view of God’s sovereignty, and his views on the intersection of biblical truth and civil society. In the last two areas particularly, American

history is incomprehensible without tracing things back to Calvin. In a very real sense, Calvin should be considered the father of the American republic.

APPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

One of the points that C.S. Lewis once made in his great essay on the reading of old books was that great books are often surprisingly *accessible*. They got to be great for a reason—people could understand them. While Mark Twain defined a classic as a book that no one wants to read, and everyone wants to have read, this joke works largely because of the way that commentators have tended to wrap great works up in learned obscurities. As a result, people are afraid of the work itself. If the commentary is so complicated, what must the original be like? Actually, the original is often a breath of fresh air.

So if a teacher feels up to it, and if the structure of the curriculum permits, I would encourage reading this primary source—either read the *Institutes*, or read key selections from the *Institutes*. Calvin wrote many other things that are worthwhile—principally his commentaries—but it seems that in a classroom setting, the focus should be on that which Calvin himself believed to be foundational to Christian living.

The *Institutes* is divided into four books. The first book concerns our relationship to God as our Creator. The second book focuses on God as our Redeemer. The third book addresses how we are supposed to receive the grace of God offered in Christ. The fourth book concerns issues of external government, both in the church and civil society.