

# The French Reformer John Calvin

by Ian Paisley

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*John Calvin was a French theologian and pastor who played a key role in the Protestant Reformation, emphasizing the importance of sovereign election, depravity, and the need for Christ alone for salvation.*

**Duration:** 31:20

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, John 1:13, 2 Corinthians 6:17, Hebrews 10:12, Hebrews 12:2, Revelation 3:20, Revelation 6:10

**Topics:** "Church History", "Election Doctrine"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the life and teachings of John Calvin, a reformer who sought to spread the gospel of Christ. Calvin initially believed he could reform the Roman church, but upon careful study, he realized it was filled with apostasy and idolatry. He then gave four reasons why he had to separate from the Roman church. The preacher also highlights Calvin's emphasis on the doctrine of election, where God takes the initiative in saving sinners. Additionally, Calvin endured persecution and remained steadfast in his faith.

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## Transcript

It's not the church you need, Frank! It's not the sacrament you need! It's not ritual you need! It's Christ you need! I'm God, none but Jesus! None but Jesus! Come to helpless sinner's good! John Calvin is probably the most misunderstood and misrepresented of all the reformers, and yet he is probably the greatest theologian and Bible expositor that ever lived. It was said that at age 22, he was the most learned man in Europe. His theological influence comes to us today through his Institutes of the Christian Religion, which are the framework for all reform systematic theologies.

In his day, John Calvin was used mightily to recover the deep truths of the gospel, which Rome hid from them. Here is Dr. Paisley now on John Calvin, the French Reformer. No other name among all the reformers causes such controversy as the name of John Calvin.

The church of Rome knew to her cost exactly the power and the spiritual force that John Calvin was while he lived. And to this very day, the theologians of Rome have sought on every occasion to malign the character and to undo the great scriptural testimony of the Geneva Reformer. And could I say that John Calvin has even been wounded in the house of his friends? And many people say many things about the great reformer.

And when I have come to study the reformer's works, I have discovered that what these people think the reformer preached, he never even mentioned. So before we come down to this message, could I ask you to give, in your study, serious attention to the great Geneva Reformer. I believe that John Calvin has a message in his life and ministry for every one of us.

What Paul was to the early church. What John Owen was to the Puritan church. John Calvin was to the church of the Reformation.

You know, I think that if you wanted to find the Elijah of the Reformation, you would find him in Martin Luther. But I believe that Calvin is the Elisha of the Reformation. And the mantle of Luther, I believe in a great measure, with double power, fell upon John Calvin.

John Calvin was born in France on the 10th of July, 1509. He was just eight years of age when Luther took his hammer and his nails and his 95 pieces and kneeled them to the church door of the old castle church at Wittenberg. So he was just a child when the first movement of the Spirit of God, that great outpouring of God's Spirit in Europe, commenced.

Known in history as the Protestant Reformation. His parents were bitter Romanists. And at the age of eight, he was appointed a Roman Catholic chaplain in order to draw from the revenues of the church.

Now, John Calvin, at the age of 12, he moved forward to Paris to commence studying for the priesthood. In Paris, he came into contact with one of his cousins. One of the ten had one great proposition to put to Calvin.

He said, take any religion and test it by this standard. Is it characterized by man or by God? If it elevates man, if it exalts man, if it deifies man, if it glorifies man, it is not the true faith. But if it exalts God, if it gives God the glory, if it puts the diadem upon the crown of Christ, then that must indeed be the true religion.

And Calvin came under deep conviction of sin. And one day as he was passing through the streets of Paris, he came to one of the squares of the city. There was a great concourse of people.

In the middle of them stood a stake. And to the stake was tied one of the early Christian martyrs of the Reformation. Calvin stood and watched the burning of this man of God.

And as he saw the flames leaping up, and he saw the flesh of this man beginning to sizzle in the tormenting flame, he looked in his countenance and he beheld the peace of heaven. And he saw a demonstration of the joy of God's salvation. Calvin wrung his hands and he said, If I had to die like this, I would have no joy, no peace, or no salvation in my soul.

This led Calvin to go home to the little garret where he stayed. And upon his knees in prayer, he embraced Christ freely, offered to Him in the gospel. And this dark Romanist became a true born-again believer.

It was at the age of eighteen that Calvin came to the Savior. In one of his commentaries in the Psalms, he says this, At first, although I was so obstinately given to the superstitions of the people, and it was extremely difficult to drag me from the depths of the mire, yet by a sudden conversion God tamed my heart and made it teachable, this heart which for its age was excessively hardened in such matters. His own personal testimony to the reality of a sudden and eternal conversion to the Savior.

Perhaps there is someone in this building this afternoon and you have never been born again. Could I repeat to you the words of Jesus Christ? Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. It is not the church you need, friend.

It is not the sacraments you need. It is not ritual you need. It is Christ that you need.

Thank God none but Jesus, none but Jesus can do helpless sinners good. Christ can meet your need this afternoon. Christ met the need of John Calvin.

Of course, immediately Calvin was saved by God's grace. He wanted to spread the story. And he became a great evangelist.

The first thing he did was to tell his fellow students of the work of grace that had been wrought in his heart. Driven from Paris, he went to Orleans and he did door-to-door testimony to Christ. In Wiley's History of the Reformation, you will find many interesting chapters of the work of John Calvin on the doorstep.

He was the first of the Reformers to go from door-to-door preaching the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. Never say, my friend, that John Calvin was not an evangelist, for he was a burning evangelist for Jesus Christ. And some of the greatest revival preachers have, of course, been preachers of the message which has been wrongly termed Calvinism.

For I believe it is a message that is found in the New Testament. Could I mention Spurgeon? Could I mention Whitefield? Could I mention that great New England preacher, Jonathan Edwards? What greater exponents of the Word of God were these men? And yet these men have been named as the leaders of Calvinistic thought. John Calvin as an evangelist.

It was in Orleans that John Calvin's heart was moved and his heart was touched with the tremendous need of Europe. And in the little church that he formed and in the company of believers gathered there, he sent forth his fellow believers as evangelists across Europe to spread the message of Christ's glorious gospel. And widely in this history of Protestantism tells the story how these men loved not their lives unto the death, but were fearful.

And today that early band all wear the martyr's crown. They are the souls of those under the altar who say, How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt thou not avenge thine own elect who cry unto thee night and day? And so we have the first stage in the Reformer's life, spreading the gospel of Christ. You know, after John Calvin was brought to Christ, he thought that he would be able to stem the tide of idolatry in the Roman church.

But after careful study of the situation, he saw that the Roman church had apostatized. He saw that there was no hope, no remedy. There was no way of stemming the dark tides of the papacy with all its idolatry and superstition.

So he sat down and he gave four reasons why he had to separate from the Roman church. I want to give you those reasons. I think that you can apply them to the present situation of apostate Protestantism.

He said the whole doctrine of godliness is adulterated by impious dogma. You see, Calvin had learned from the New Testament that true godliness does not consist in being ceremonies and the rules of man. Could I say in reference to the situation, isn't that what is happening in apostate Protestantism today? Impious dogma, which have no partner lot in the great revelation that God has given of His Son in the

Word of God.

And I may, people and congregations, are fed in the mere husks of a Christless philosophy when it there should be presented to them the pure and living and unadulterated Word of the living God. Will you ever be able to stem the tide in the apostate church never? You can do everything you like. You can have your prayer meetings.

You can have your evangelistic campaigns. But God in His Word has shown us a way. And the way is to stand outside the camp for Christ.

There is a word coming down the corridors of time. It is a word of John Calvin. And it is a word of clarion trumpet call to the men and women of God in this generation to come out from among them and be separate and touch not the unclean thing.

God says, I will receive you. I will be a father unto you. And ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord of Hosts.

And then Calvin said the whole worship of God is ideated by foul and disgraceful superstition. And, of course, we have the same thing happening today. Emphasis placed upon ordinances and upon ritual and upon ceremonies and upon things that are material.

Don't we find it in apostate Protestantism today? What does the Word of God say? The Word of God points us to Calvary, and it says this man, having offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. The blessed Christ of God has finished the work. And it is not Christ's sacrifice plus anything.

It is Christ's sacrifice on precious blood alone that saves the soul. And then he goes on to say that poor souls which ought to be ruled by the doctrine of Christ are oppressed by cruel bondage. Oh, the bondage! The bondage that apostate Protestantism brings the people into! A few years ago I was having a time of rest in a little seaside resort in Northern Ireland called Bangor.

A lady stopped me in the street. She said, Mr. Paisley, would you go and visit my uncle? He is dying with cancer. He is in one of the hospitals in Belfast.

I said, I would. And I went to see this man. When I got to the ward, he was lying there.

The marks of the disease could be seen clearly upon his body. He put out his hand and he shook hands with me. And he said to me these words.

He belonged to the Episcopal Church. This is what he said. He said, I have been everything and done everything that my church has asked me to do.

And the doctor tells me I am dying with cancer. And I remember that heart-rending voice and tone that he used. And he said, Mr. Paisley, I am in an awful bondage.

And it is dark down the road. It is dark down the road. Our Christless Protestantism has no peace or no joy or no future to offer to man.

Thank God that afternoon I had the joy of presenting him with Christ, my wonderful Savior, for He came from the brightness of glory, His blood for a ransom He shed, to purchase eternal redemption. And oh, He

is mighty to save! Thank God that day that dear man got gloriously saved by the grace of God. You know, I was with him a year afterwards.

He lingered for one year. I was there when he died. I propped John up on the bed with the pillows.

I took the ice water and put it across his lips. And we repeated the old shepherd's psalm, Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And as I repeated that, he said, lift me up.

And I put my arm round his shoulder and I lifted him up on that bed. And he repeated it after me, Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear. And then he stopped.

And then with all the strength of his weak body and weak voice, he shouted. The nurses heard him. Those lying on the adjacent beds heard him.

He said, No! No! No evil! And he fell asleep in Christ. And thank God I greet him in the golden streets of heaven. What are they? The church? No.

The creed? No. The sacrament? No. He had Jesus! That is all he needed.

Thank God for God's great salvation. Was it any wonder that Calvin separated from a church which had no salvation to give? And then Calvin said forthly, The grace of Christ not only was half buried, but is partly torn to pieces, partly altogether extinguished by Rome. These were the four reasons that he gave for his separation.

These reasons, who would take them today, there are reasons for our separation from the apostate denominations of our day. And now we come to him as the great controversialist. The 21st of December, 1533, William Farrell entered the city of Geneva.

It was a stronghold of Romanism. There were many hundreds of priests in control of the citizens of the city. The year after, William Farrell, the great evangelist of the Reformers, commenced preaching the gospel.

A great change took place in the city of Geneva. And in August of the following year, John Calvin came along to stop one night in the city. William Farrell confronted him with the need of Geneva, challenged him to remain, to become the teacher and pastor of the people.

And the one who came to tarry for a night tarried twenty-eight years, and Geneva became the citadel of the Calvinistic Reformation, not only in Switzerland, but throughout Europe. Calvin had two great enemies in Geneva, the Libertines, the gross materialists, and the Romanists, who were the gross idolaters. These two forces battled to silence the testimony of the Reformers.

And there will be two things, young people, you will do battle with in your ministry. And the first thing will be false living. And the second thing will be false doctrine.

The Libertines lived wrongly, lived for the material. And the Romanists preached and taught wrongly. And my, we who have been in the ministry, we have come up against this same thing.

The communion season came round in Geneva, and these false livers came forward to take in their hands the bread and wine, the elements of Christ's precious broken body and shed blood. John Calvin stood between them and the table, and he said, These are holy things, and they will not be given to the unholy. I

must, as a gospel preacher, be faithful to my Lord.

And the holy things of God cannot be given to the unholy. And when you are in the ministry, young person, let me tell you, you will have many a battle to keep your church clean for God. Let me tell you something I have experienced.

Never compromise. Never allow worldliness. Never allow those that are flirting with the devil in the world to remain in the church or in office in the church.

Never compromise. Fight with the Libertines, friend, like Calvin. And then, of course, there are those that peddle the false doctrines of potpourri and of apostasy.

We have got to battle with that. Calvin battled with both. He was eventually invited back to the city, having been exiled by the influence of the Libertines.

And then he suffered all sorts of persecution. And if you are going to stand for Christ, there will be all sorts of persecution hurled at you. It is not going to be an easy pathway.

The way of the cross. And you will really have it tough and hard. And you will have your days when you are right down in the darkness.

And you will have your days when you are back against the wall. In Geneva, they called their dogs after Calvin. And they would try to bring that great preacher down and break his spirit.

But through it all, boldly, unashamedly, the great Reformers stood true to Jesus Christ. It is not always the public onslaught that will break you. Just the nagging and the little petty jealousies and the little petty persecutors.

My, they are the little foxes that spoil a vine. But Calvin endured it all as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. We are coming now to Calvin as a teaching Calvinist.

What were the doctrines that Calvin preached? I would mention five. I believe they form the diadem of the gospel crowd. First of all, Calvin emphasized a depravity that is complete from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head.

There is no soundness in man but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores. And if you think, my friend, in God's eyes you are decent and respectable and acceptable, you are under the delusion of the devil. You are depraved, uncorrupted, ill-deserving, undeserving, heaven-condemned, heart-condemned, conscience-condemned.

That is where the sinner is. We have far too much whitewashing of sin today. We have far too many preachers to make man supernatural beings instead of sinful beings.

You are a sinner, friend. This is where Calvin started. I think we need to emphasize this truth that is a depravity that is complete.

Every bitter man is corrupted. In the heart he has a corrupted heart. In the mind he has a corrupted mind.

In the will he has a corrupted will, a depraved will, a will that wants to run away from God. Remember, the first sinner was Adam. He had not sinned too long.

What did he want to do? He wanted to hide himself from God. A depraved will makes man run away from God. Let me tell you something.

You know what the gospel is. The gospel is not man's quest for God. But, thank God, it is God's quest for man.

God is looking for man. Thank God He looked for me and He found me. It is a depravity that is complete.

Have a look at yourself in the mirror of God's Word and there is nothing good about you. You are a twisted, contorted sinner. Never saw petal and sin.

This is the message Calvin preached. A depravity that is complete. There is not some divine spark in man.

No, sir. You know, some preachers believe man is corrupted except his will. But his will is pretty good.

He has a bad heart. He has a bad soul. He has a bad conscience.

But his will is not too bad. I believe his will is just as corrupt as his heart. It is a depravity that is complete.

And then the second great thing was this. He preached an election that is sovereign. Let me try and illustrate it to you.

If man can do nothing to save himself, that is where God puts the sinner. Who makes the first move? Tell me. If anybody is going to get to heaven, who is going to make the first move? Why, the God of grace must make the move.

Thank God He has made it. Where does it start? It commences with God. It continues with God.

And it consummates in God. God in the commencement. God in the continuing.

God in the conclusion. He is the Alpha and Omega. He is the author and He is the finisher.

This is the gospel that Calvin preached. I have a good Baptist preacher at home. He is a very godly man and he tells a story.

I think it would illustrate it. There was a very beautiful young lady and she was an heiress to a great mansion. And in the same neighborhood there was a farmer's son.

And this farmer's son was an adopted son. One day the farmer went to a huge orphanage and he took this boy home. He made this boy his adopted son and appointed him as his heir.

And you know this very beautiful young lady used to drive along the roads. And the farmer's son used to behold her afar off. And then they got a little more friendly.

And then they started going out together. One day the farmer's boy, he got great courage. And he looked at her and he said, Would you marry me? Marry you, she said.

Who are you? You were just brought out of an orphan home. You're only an orphan. Nobody knows who your real father was.

Who your real mother was. And you know that boy looked at her. He said, I want to tell you that I'm far better than you.

She said, what do you mean? Well, he said, my father went to the orphanage. And there were over a thousand boys. And he looked them all over.

Every one of them. And he picked me out of the whole thousand. But as for your father, he had to take what he got.

It illustrates, it doesn't, that I'm glad, friend. And let me say this. God came down to this old world.

And thank God, out of the masses of men, He put a loving hand on me. And I love Him because He first, He first loved me. That's selection that's sovereign, friend.

What needs to be preached. And then let me tell you a third thing. It's an atonement that's sufficient.

What do I mean by that? As far as the blood of Jesus is concerned. And as far as the passion of Christ is concerned. And as far as the substitutionary death of Christ is concerned.

It's all sufficient. Not only for the world, but ten thousand worlds. But remember this.

It's only efficient to those that believe. Never let us forget that. And the atonement for me, really atoned for my sin.

And the debt's paid. And payment God will not twice demand. First at my bleeding surety's hand.

And then again at mine. It's a grace that's irresistible. Now when God starts to deal with you, what love, what grace? What is grace anyway? Grace is free, unmerited, undeserved favor.

I deserve to go to hell. Thank God I'm going to heaven today. It's the grace of God.

Irresistible. He drew me. Draw me, said the spouse in the song.

And I shall run after thee. He drew me. And last of all, it's His salvation that's eternal.

Thank God I'll be in heaven all right. I'm not going to fall away tomorrow and go to hell. God has saved me.

God has kept me. God will support me. Thank God He'll see us be glorified and brought home.

And He's going to bring us all home to heaven. And we'll sing the Hallelujah Chorus. We'll not pat ourselves on the shoulder and say, well done, you've made it.

But we'll sing unto Him who has loved us. And loosed us from our sins in His own blood. To Him be the glory.

May God bless His truth for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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