

John Calvin

by J.C. Philpot

John Calvin's writings and system of doctrine have had a lasting impact on the church, presenting a clear and systematic understanding of doctrine that has influenced generations of preachers and writers.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:9, 1 Corinthians 3:6, Ephesians 4:11, 2 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 13:17

Topics: "Reformation History", "Christian Theology"

Description

J.C. Philpot reflects on the lives and works of two prominent figures of the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, highlighting their differences in temperament, approach, and impact. Luther is portrayed as bold, fiery, and action-oriented, while Calvin is depicted as a deep thinker, theologian, and systematic writer. Despite their contrasting styles, both men were powerful intellects, faithful servants of God, and instrumental in the spread of the Reformation. Calvin's return to Geneva after exile is described as a triumph of truth over error, leading to a period of significant influence and impact on the city.

Transcript

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Two men, giants in intellect and blessed saints of the Most High, but widely differing in the work which they had to perform, and the manner in which they executed it, were raised up in the 16th century by the God of all grace to commence and carry on the blessed Reformation, that goodly tree under the shadow of which we are now sitting. These two eminent saints and servants of God, in whom gifts and grace, cultivated intellect and spiritual light, human learning and divine teaching, apostolic labors and apostolic suffering, were combined in a way of which we have now lost even the very idea, were LUTHER and CALVIN. The two men widely differed in their mental constitution, temper, habits, and even in some of their religious views. Luther was a thorough German; and had, in spite of occasional coarseness of language and rudeness of manner incidental to the period, all that native nobility of mind, that openness, frankness, bravery, and boldness, sincerity and truthfulness, which, from the remotest ages, have characterized the German race.

Calvin was a Frenchman; and though widely differing in mental constitution from that light-hearted nation, yet, as a writer, had all that subtlety of intellect and clearness of thought, that buoyancy of style, that logical accuracy, and that high finish which distinguish the French authors above those of all other

nations.† Both were men of powerful intellect, deep learning, and intense study, thorough masters of the scriptures, which they read day and night, unwearied preachers in public and indefatigable instructors in private, faithful counselors of all that needed advice, fervent lovers of truth and holiness, and no less fervent haters of error and evil; godly in life, blessed in death, and now happy in eternity.

But with all these points of resemblance, the two men widely differed. Luther was more the Elijah, Calvin the Paul of the Reformation. Luther thundered and lightened against the Pope and his shaven crew; burnt his bulls; mocked and derided his legates and prelates; and by a very storm of tracts,† in thoughts that breathe and words that burn,‡ lighted a fire in Germany which, like that on Mount Carmel, consumed the wood, and stones, and dust, and licked up the water in the trench. Calvin was not such a man of action, or of such fiery energy; he had not by nature the same intrepidity of mind, or even by grace the same martyr spirit; nor did he stand so forward in the very van and front of the battle as the stout-hearted German. Luther at the Diet of Worms, confronting the Emperor and all the assembled princes of Germany, and Calvin publishing his works under false names,‡‡ and hiding himself in various places in Paris and other parts, present a striking contrast. His work, though in the issue perhaps more important than that of Luther's, was not to stand before assembled princes, or hurl bold and loud defiance against popes, but was carried on in the quiet depths of his own mind, and the close recesses of his study. There, in silence and solitude, were molded and elaborated those works which have exercised so vast and salutary an influence on the church of God, and the leading truths of which have penetrated into so many living consciences.

Though a man of energy and action at a later period, when grace gave him a firmness and boldness which he did not naturally possess, enabling him to rule Geneva with a rod of iron, and to exercise almost as much civil as spiritual authority in that little republic, his chief work was rather to take the burning fragments of truth, mingled sometimes with scum and slag, that Luther hurled forth, and separating from them the dross and tin, to weld the whole mass into a compact, homogeneous form. He could not preach with the power nor write with the vigor of Luther; nor had he, with all his piercing intellect, that grasp of mind and that authority of thought and language whereby the German Reformer could almost at will raise or quell a storm.

As a theologian, as an expounder of scripture, as a clear, deep, and patient thinker, as a systematic writer on the grand doctrines of truth, as an able administrator, and as a godly, self-denying, mortified saint and servant of God, Calvin excelled Luther. But in an experience of the terrors of the law and manifested blessings of the gospel, in a deep acquaintance with temptation and conflict internal and external, in life and power so far as he saw and felt the things of God, and in unvaried unflinching boldness of speech and conduct, Luther as far outshone him. Calvin was naturally shy, timid, and retiring; zealous, no doubt, for the glory of God, but not a little jealous too of his own; stern and unforgiving when offended; in principle and practice a rigid disciplinarian, and too often carrying the severity of the law into the precepts of the gospel. You would highly esteem him as a saint, and deeply venerate him as a servant of God; but you would find it difficult to love him as a man or make him a bosom friend. His godly, self-denying life and walk and holy example would often reprove you, and might stir you up to desire for yourself a measure of the same grace; but if you were much tempted and tried, plagued by sin, assailed by Satan, and sometimes almost at your wits' end, you would rather open your heart to Martin Luther than to John Calvin. He lived for the most part out of the storm and whirlwind of human passions; and therefore had little sympathy with those that have to do business in deep waters.

A stern censor of any approach to gaiety of dress, manner, or life, even in men who were manifestly unregenerate, he sternly carried out a system of discipline that might suit the church, but which could not be enforced on the world. He was, therefore, never beloved even in that city where he ruled as chief and where his word was law. Living in his study in continual meditation, he could not throw himself, like Luther, into the popular heart as a man of the people; nor could he, like him, strike chords which have never ceased to sound in Protestant Germany to this day.

Every true-hearted German is proud of Luther. His very name even now calls up visions of liberty in their enthralled bosoms; his hymns are sung in their churches; his pointed, pithy sayings have become national proverbs; the educated classes admire him as the undaunted champion of civil and religious freedom, and the great classic who first molded into form and almost launched into birth their noble language; and the poor honor him as one of their own class, and as one before whom popes, emperors, and kings had to doff their caps. When Germany ceases to admire and venerate Luther, she will be Russianised in stem and revolutionized in root. None despise him there but a tyrannical aristocracy, a papistic priesthood, an infidel press, and a revolutionary mob.

Does Calvin lie so deeply imbedded in a nation's heart? Though, to a great extent, he did for the French language what Luther did for the German, making a crude and antiquated dialect a vehicle of the most accurate and refined thought, yet is he despised as a fanatic by that nation of which he is so bright an ornament, and by which he was driven into exile. Even in Geneva, the seat of his labors, where he once held almost the whole sway of government, he is but little remembered and less venerated. Socinianism fills those pulpits which once resounded with the accents of Calvin's voice, and those few ministers who hold and preach his sentiments are bitterly persecuted in the very city where he was so honored in life and lamented in death.

And yet with all this, as a Reformer in the church of God, and as an expositor of divine truth, Calvin has had an enduring influence in which Luther has comparatively failed. Not that Calvin discovered any new truth, or was the first writer who laid down the doctrine of election with accuracy and clearness. Augustine in the fifth, and Bradwardine and Wycliffe in the 14th century, had set forth the doctrines of grace with almost equal profundity of thought and clearness of style; but the age in which they lived was not prepared to receive the truth from their lips or pen. The doctrine of divine sovereignty in their mouth was rather the private experience of a solitary believer, the inward food of an isolated individual, than the bread of life broken up for famishing multitudes. But the Reformation roused men out of the deep sleep of centuries; and the Spirit of God having quickened the souls of many into a hungering and thirsting after righteousness, when the truth of God was brought before them by Calvin's hand, it was gladly and eagerly received by those who felt themselves starving amid the husks for swine.

By the singular clearness of his style, his deep scriptural knowledge, the readiness and aptness of his quotations, and the full mastery which he had of his subject, Calvin became a teacher of teachers, and a preacher to preachers. Under his pen the scriptures uttered a definite creed; sounded by his lips, the gospel trumpet gave forth a certain sound; a harmony and consistency were seen to pervade the whole of divine revelation; and his hand, it was at once felt, had seized the clue, the only clue which led the convinced sinner safely through those mazes where so many before had wandered in confusion and sorrow. Grace having shone into his soul was reflected, as in a mirror, by his clear understanding, and thence, as he directed it upon the pages of inspired truth, the scripture was seen to be illuminated as with a new and immediate light from heaven. His writings have, therefore, influenced directly or indirectly every preacher and every writer who has been of any service to the church of God from that time to this.

His system is so thoroughly scriptural, so accurately drawn out, and so firmly and compactly welded together, that it not only commends itself to the conscience of all who are taught of God, but presents an impenetrable front to all adversaries. His views, too, of church government, though we cannot look upon them with an approving eye, have exercised scarcely less influence than his doctrines, and have even molded the character of nations. The Scotch and Dutch people, at the best periods of their history, are wonderful instances of the permanent effect produced upon a nation by the establishment not only of Calvin's doctrines, but by the adoption of his system of church government. John Knox, Rutherford, and all the old Covenanters that did and suffered so much for the glory of God in Scotland; all those martyrs who shed their blood like water sooner than Arminianism in doctrine and Episcopacy in government should be forced upon them at the point of the sword, were but disciples of Calvin; and the Kirk which they loved almost to idolatry was but a copy of the church established by him at Geneva. No, we Nonconformists and Dissenters, who have rightly abandoned Calvin's views of church government for a purer and more scriptural system, yet we too, under God, owe mainly to him the leading principles of our faith and practice; for we are the spiritual descendants of that holy band of Puritan Refugees who, returning from Switzerland after the persecution of Queen Mary, introduced into this country those pure principles of religious worship, learned from Calvin and his disciples, which have placed us in irreconcilable opposition to the mimicry and mummery of a worldly establishment.

The personal history of Calvin is so little known to any but those who have made it an object of study, that perhaps a short sketch of so distinguished a man may not be unacceptable to our readers as well as form a suitable introduction to the work at the head of the present article.

John Calvin was born at Noyon, a small town in Picardy, a province in the north of France, on July 10th, 1509. His father was Gerard Calvin, a notary in the ecclesiastical court of Noyon, and secretary to the bishop; an office to which he, the son of a poor cooper, had mainly raised himself by his great abilities and judgment, and in the execution of which he commanded the respect and esteem of the chief noble families of the province. Being himself a man of distinguished mental ability, and living in habits of familiar communion with the great church dignitaries and chief men of the province, he was desirous to give his children, and especially his son John, a similar education with those of the highest rank. The opportunity presented itself through an illustrious family, at that time resident in the province, of the name of Mommor, with the children of which noble house the young Calvin, who from a child manifested great talent, was domesticated and educated.

His father, like Luther, and perhaps most parents in those days, was singularly rigid and severe; and thus we see in the plastic days of childhood two opposite influences acting upon his infant mind which molded between them his future disposition--great refinement of mental culture and manner, and rigid severity of conduct. The former he owed to the circumstances of his early education; the latter, if not hereditary, to the influence of his father. Timid and bashful in disposition, silent and grave in manner, taking no pleasure in the sports of childhood, but devoted to study, and flying sometimes into the depths of the adjoining forest there to read and meditate, on he grew, until at twelve years of age he received what is called the clerical tonsure, that is, had his hair solemnly cut off from the crown of his head by the Bishop, as the first step before receiving orders in the Romish Church. The object of this step, one not unusual at that period, was not so much to devote him to the altar as to enable him to hold a chaplaincy, to which, according to the corrupt practice of that age, even a child might be presented, if he received the tonsure.

For two years had the boy chaplain enjoyed his clerical dignity and the emoluments connected with it, when a terrible pestilence broke out at Noyon. The children of the noble family of Mommor, partly to flee

the pestilence, and partly to pursue their studies, were about to proceed to Paris, then as now the great center of learning and education. Terrified lest his son John should die of the plague, desirous that he should not be separated from his noble fellow students, and anxious to complete an education for which such singular aptitude was exhibited, Gerard Calvin petitioned the Chapter that the young chaplain might have a dispensation to accompany them to Paris, retaining, with an eye to what is called the main chance, the emoluments of his benefice. This being granted up to a named period, the youthful Calvin left his native town for the great metropolis, then or some time after the focus of a terrible persecution against the opponents of the Mass and the adherents to the reformed doctrines.

It does not appear that at this period the light of divine truth had either penetrated into his conscience, or had even come before his mind. What religion he had was wholly in accordance with the then prevailing Romish views, which, as we learn from himself, he held with a most bigoted and stubborn obstinacy. On reaching Paris, he became domesticated in the house of an uncle, Richard Calvin, and who seems to have been somewhat imbued with those new doctrines which were then agitating France, and which a century afterwards threw it into all the convulsions of civil war. The timid and shy student lad was now growing up into a youth of middle stature, whose complexion, naturally dark, but pale with thought and study, was relieved by a set of animated features, and an eye singularly clear and bright, which even to his dying day revealed the fire of genius that burnt within. His dress singularly neat and modest; his grave and silent deportment; his entire separation from all society but that of a few choice friends; his disgust, which he took no pains to conceal, at the sports and idle frolics of his fellow students; his severe reproofs of their outbreaks into sin and wickedness; and his own not only perfectly moral, but even austere and rigid life, gave promise of what he would be when grace visited his soul and turned the current into the channel of vital godliness.

But at this period study and more especially that of the Latin language, at that time the great vehicle of thought, and in which he became so accomplished a writer, was his main object. Like a ship launched upon the waters, or a horse rushing into the battle, this pale youth threw himself into study, mastering with such ease and so retaining in the grasp of his powerful memory all to which he applied his mind, that he seemed to take by assault the citadel of learning which his fellow students were but slowly and often unsuccessfully besieging. Rising to the top of every class, he had to be removed from them all that he might receive that instruction in private in which no class could follow him.

Looking at the features of his mind as afterwards more fully developed by long and severe culture, he seems to have possessed from the very first certain mental qualities in a degree that few men have ever been favored with. Acute penetration into the heart of every subject, clear comprehension in the mass and in detail, power and precision in reasoning, and that logical accuracy of thought whereby every link of a long chain of argument is struck and maintained in its exact place, were the chief characteristics of his mind; and as these were aided by a most capacious and retentive memory, and a clear, simple style of language and expression, he was enabled to employ them with the greatest facility and to their utmost extent.

The college at which he was first placed not being able to advance him beyond a certain point, he removed to another in the same metropolis where he made still greater progress in those studies to which he directed his attention. Though he had received the tonsure, he had not been admitted into orders, and was therefore in a strict sense not an ecclesiastic. The extraordinary abilities which he had already displayed induced, therefore, his father to make him renounce the study of theology for that of the law. In compliance with his father's wishes, the youthful student left Paris for the University of Orleans, in order to

study jurisprudence under a celebrated professor there, who was reputed the acutest lawyer in France.

His friend Beza gives us a few particulars of Calvin's life during his residence at Orleans, which he had probably heard from his own lips, and tells us that he was accustomed to spend half the night in study and in the morning lie in bed to reflect upon what he had read. But he paid the usual penalty for such intense study, for here he laid the foundation of those bodily disorders, and especially those cruel headaches which embittered his future life. Though we have no clear and distinct account of his call by grace, yet it would appear that it was during his abode at Orleans that divine light and life entered his conscience, or if the fear of God was not there first implanted, yet that there it was sensibly deepened. He tells us himself, in his Preface to the Psalms, that his call was sudden, and that previously he had been an obstinate and devoted bigot to every papal superstition.

A near relative, Olivetan, who afterwards translated the scriptures into French, was the person, according to Beza, from whom he derived his first bias toward the reformed doctrines; and it was by his advice and example that he was particularly led to read and study the scriptures. He thus came at once to the fountain head of all spiritual wisdom and knowledge, and without any other guide or teacher but the Holy Spirit, was led by him into that vital experience of the truth which he so richly possessed. But though made alive unto God, he did not at once devote himself to the service of the sanctuary.

It was the custom of that period to move from University to University, to obtain the advantage of the most celebrated teachers. Calvin therefore left Orleans to complete his legal studies at the University of Bourges, the most renowned school in France for that branch of science; and here he began to lay the foundations of a knowledge in the Greek language, to which he had as yet not paid much previous attention. But the work of God was still going on in his soul. The fire was shut up in his bones; and as it burnt within he could not stay or hold his peace.

It was at Bourges and in the neighboring villages that he first began to open his mouth in the name of the Lord, and to preach that truth which had been commended to his conscience and made precious to his own soul. Some peculiar and divine power must have rested upon him from his very commencement to declare God's truth, for before a year had elapsed all in the neighborhood who were desirous of knowing the pure doctrines of the Gospel came to him for instruction; and in spite of his shy and retiring habits and studious pursuits which made such interruptions naturally distasteful, he could not refuse to minister to their instruction and consolation.

Calvin was now about twenty-three years of age, and still studying the law at Bourges, when an event took place which exercised a great influence upon his future life. This was the sudden death of his father, which rendered him master of his own actions, and enabled him to abandon the law for those pursuits and studies which were more congenial to those desires after God and godliness which had been communicated to his soul. He therefore left Bourges, and once more repaired to Paris, where, relinquishing all other studies, he devoted his whole mind to those alone which he considered necessary to qualify him for becoming a "workman who needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Paris was at this time in a remarkable state. Persecution had already commenced against the professors of the reformed doctrines, but not in that fearful form which it assumed about two years afterwards, when, after a solemn procession through the streets of Paris, in which the king walked barefooted, and with a candle in his hand, after the host, borne under a canopy, six people, who were convicted of Lutheranism, were publicly burnt at a slow fire. There was, however, a sufficient amount of persecution going on to

compel the evangelical congregations to assemble in the greatest secrecy. Calvin, we have already remarked, was naturally not only of a very shy and retiring, but timid disposition. Yet here he began to manifest the power of grace in giving him that boldness for truth in the midst of danger which formed afterwards so prominent a part in his character. He was constantly employed in preaching to the congregations which met in secret, and always concluded with those suitable words, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

A singular circumstance, however, was the cause of his being obliged somewhat abruptly to abandon the scene of his labors. A theological college, well known all over Europe by the name of the Sorbonne, and universally considered the great pillar of Catholic orthodoxy, had newly elected and placed at its head a rector by the name of Nicholas Cop. The new rector had secretly imbibed the tenets of the Reformation, and having become acquainted with Calvin, accepted his offer to compose a sermon which was to be delivered before the assembled College on the festival of All-Saints. To the consternation, not less than the indignation of the assembled doctors, this sermon, instead of, as was usually the case, furiously upholding the doctrines of Popery, and furiously attacking the tenets of the Reformation, boldly set forth justification by faith alone as the way of salvation, and unflinchingly declared that the Gospel was the sole standard of divine truth.

Such an attack as this upon their darling creed of salvation by works, and no less idolized doctrine of the authority of the Pope, and as they considered such an insult to the world-renowned theologians of the first college in Europe, could not be overlooked. Cop, who probably had but partially read the sermon before he preached it, was denounced by the Sorbonne doctors to the Parliament of Paris, who taking the matter warmly up, sent their officers to apprehend him. He, however, having received through a friend timely notice, had already escaped to Basle, in Switzerland, his native town, where neither doctors nor officers could touch a hair of his head; but Calvin's share in the transaction having got wind, the police were sent to seize him.

The Lord, however, would not give him over a prey to their teeth. It is said that he was so near being apprehended that he only escaped by letting himself down from his window by the sheets of his bed; and seeking the house of a vine-dresser whom he knew, probably one of his little congregation, put on his rough smock frock, with a white wallet on his back, and a hoe upon his shoulders, and took the road on foot to Noyon. He was now compelled to lead a wandering life, through which we cannot now follow him, preaching as opportunity offered, but chiefly employed in writing his great work, the "Institutes of the Christian Religion." Persecution was now growing hotter and hotter every day; and most of them who had made themselves conspicuous by their contending for the faith once delivered to the saints, felt themselves compelled to leave France for some safe and tranquil asylum.

Among these was Calvin, who fled to Basle, in Switzerland, which offered a secure refuge to all exiles for conscience sake, being a free city on the banks of the Rhine, over which neither pope nor prince had any power. Here he became acquainted with many of the leading German reformers, especially Bucer, afterwards so well known in England, and especially at Oxford, where he was made divinity professor. And here it was that he was enabled to put the last touches to, and to publish A.D. 1535, the first edition of his great work, "The Institutes of the Christian Religion." At this time he was only twenty-six years of age; and yet his views of divine truth, especially of those doctrines which from him have been called Calvinistic, were fully matured. When we consider the wandering life which he had led from the time that grace first visited his soul, and the persecutions which he had to endure, both of which must have sadly interrupted his meditations and studies, we stand amazed at the clearness and depth of that mind which could give

us, under such circumstances, a work so replete with every excellence.

His "Institutes" is a body of Christian divinity in which all the great doctrines of our most holy faith are laid down with the greatest clearness and accuracy, so that there is scarcely a single point in the whole truth of God which does not find its right place there. The influence exerted by this work, which at once became a text book for private study and public lectures, both in this and every country where the gospel found any footing, is incalculable. Never before had the truth been presented with such clearness of statement, such abundance of scriptural proof, and such felicity of language. It at once, therefore, established itself as a bulwark against error, and a guide into the truth as it is in Jesus.

But the time was drawing near when Calvin was to be no longer a wanderer and fugitive, but have a settled house and home, and be put into possession of a religious center, from which his influence, not only as a writer, but as introducing and carrying out a new and original platform of church government, might be extended to the remotest parts. Men speak of accidents; but accidents with God there can be none. It was then by an accident, as men call it, that Geneva was made Calvin's resting place. His elder brother Charles dying unmarried, the paternal inheritance devolved on Calvin. He proceeded, therefore, to Noyon, to sell the estate and put his affairs in order; for well he knew that French soil was never more to be a resting place for him. His intention, upon leaving Noyon, was to proceed to Basle or Strasburgh, meaning in one of those cities permanently to pitch his tent. The army, however, of Charles V. having at that time penetrated into France, the usual way was closed, and he was forced to take a circuitous route through Geneva. This simple circumstance determined the current of his whole future life, and this accidental visit to Geneva was, in the hands of God, made the means of fixing him there, with the exception of a short interval, for the rest of his life.

At the south-west corner of one of the largest and most beautiful lakes of Switzerland, within sight of the giant of the Alps, Mont Blanc, which rears its hoary crest more than 15,000 feet into the sky, and cut in twain by "The blue rushing of the arrowy Rhone," lies the free and independent city of Geneva. No place could have been better fitted both by local situation, and political as well as religious circumstances, to become a spiritual metropolis at the time of the Reformation, than this Queen of the Lemman lake. Three great countries, France, Germany, and Italy, meet at that narrow angle where the Rhone gushes out of its bosom; and in its rear rises, in scene after scene of majestic grandeur and beauty, that land of mountain and lake, of glacier and valley, that native home of bravery and freedom, Switzerland. The circumstances of Geneva, both political and religious, at the period where we paused in our late Review of the life of Calvin, were no less favorable to its becoming a great center of the Reformed doctrines than its natural site.

Having newly shaken off her Popish bishop, and driven away by force of arms the Duke of Savoy, and thus having got rid of both her ecclesiastical and civil oppressors, she had a short time before Calvin's arrival constituted herself a republic, and thus opened a path for political liberty; and mainly through the preaching of Farel, one of the most remarkable characters that was ever raised up by the power of God to preach the gospel, had about the same period (August, 1535) formally abolished Popery, and established Protestantism in its stead as the religion of the State.

Four ministers and two deacons were appointed by the Council with fixed salaries, payable out of the ecclesiastical revenues, and strict regulations were made to enforce the observance of the Sabbath and the conducting of public worship. Terrible scenes of violence, however, had accompanied the first planting of the gospel at Geneva; and the city was still rocking with the storm. Just then at this very crisis, when a

man of powerful mind, sound judgment, inflexible purpose, and thoroughly possessed of vital godliness, was needed to grasp the helm, the providence of God sent Calvin to the city. His intention was to stop only a single night at the house of Viret, one of the lately chosen Protestant ministers. But Farel was at this juncture in the city, and hearing of the arrival of Calvin, with whose character he was well acquainted, and moved, doubtless, by a divine impulse, immediately sought him out, and obtaining an interview, earnestly begged him to abide at Geneva, and lend his aid the cause of God by accepting the office of the ministry there. Calvin at first steadily declined acceding to his request, on the ground that he did not wish to accept any public office, having determined to devote his life to private study and seclusion from all public employ. Farel, however, changing his tone from entreaty to command, and assuming almost apostolic authority, bade him stay, denouncing him with God's displeasure, and almost with the curse of Meroz if he did not come "to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty." (Judges 5:23.)

Overcome by Farel's voice and manner, which had struck awe into thousands, and recognizing in them a power which reached his inmost soul, Calvin (to use his own words) felt "as if God had laid his hand upon him out of heaven," abandoned his projected journey, and consented to remain at Geneva, but would not bind himself to accept any definite charge or public office. How strikingly do we see in all this the marvelous providence of God, and with what divine sovereignty yet with what consummate wisdom he selects as well as fashions his own instruments to execute his own work.

Calvin was not the man to rush into a Popish town, and like a soldier storming the breach, to carry the gospel in one hand and his life in the other. This was Farel's work--the fearless, undaunted Farel, who, with half of Calvin's learning, had double of Calvin's courage, and thrice Calvin's energy. But when the ground was once fairly cleared, and the Reformation firmly established, then the vigorous intellect of Calvin, his great knowledge of divine truth, his enduring fortitude, his self-denying godly life, his far-seeing administrative talent, his calm, inflexible firmness of purpose, his amazing industry, and his great ability as a writer and as a preacher, were all admirably adapted to carry on what Farel had begun. Farel could throw down, but could not so well build; Calvin could build, but not so thoroughly pull down. But as coadjutors, they were admirably mated. Farel was a man of action, Calvin a man of thought; Farel was a preacher of fiery eloquence, Calvin a writer of deep, but calm scriptural knowledge. Both were men of God, ardent lovers of truth, bosom friends and affectionate brethren for life, and so matched as fellow laborers that Farel's impetuosity urged on Calvin's slowness, and Calvin's judgment restrained Farel's rashness.

When we consider Calvin's circumstances at this time, we can see there were solid reasons why he should be induced to pitch his tent at Geneva. Severed from all ties of family and country, driven out of France by the strong arm of persecution, he could not but be desirous to obtain a haven from the storms of outward violence, as well as a safe and abiding home, and a position where he could be of some service to the church of Christ. Thus, as most of God's saints and servants have experienced, the dealings of his providence and the dealings of his grace, both combined to work out his eternal purposes, and to fix Calvin's abode in that city which has become lastingly identified with his memory and name.

He was soon chosen teacher of theology, an important post in those days--when the truth was so little known--and one peculiarly adapted to his spiritual gifts and intellectual abilities; but from diffidence, or not seeing clearly the will of God, declined the office of minister. Such gifts as his, however, could not long be hid in a corner; and in the following year (February, 1537,) he was induced to take upon himself the burden of the Lord. His first sermon made such a deep and striking impression on the hearers that multitudes followed him home to testify to the power of the word, and he was obliged to promise that he

would preach again next day, so that others who were not then present might be similarly favored.

Being thus firmly established at Geneva, and having obtained a place by his grace and gifts in the esteem and affections of the people, Calvin did not long delay to associate himself closely with Farel in pushing on those wide and deep plans of reformation and religious discipline which they believed were needful for the full establishment of the gospel in that city.

No man admires or reveres the Reformers more than we do, but if we dare to advance an opinion adverse to their movements, we have long thought that they greatly erred in endeavoring to bind a gospel yoke on a carnal people, and turn the precepts of the New Testament into a legal code. Gospel precepts, like gospel promises, belong to believers only; and New Testament discipline is for the government of New Testament churches alone. But their view was to make the reformed religion a national thing; to incorporate the gospel with the government, and to visit sins against the New Testament as crimes against the State. By so doing, they virtually denied their own principles: for if there be an elect people, the gospel alone belongs to them; and you cannot consistently punish carnal men for the infraction of gospel precepts when they have no interest in gospel promises.

We are touching here, we are well aware, on a most difficult question--how far the State should recognize the religion of the New Testament without constituting it into an establishment; and while it punishes crime, how far it should repress immorality and sin. Allow the State to interfere at will in matters of conscience and religion, and you convert it into an engine of persecution. Deny it all interference in religion, and it cannot suppress loud-mouthed blasphemy, the grossest profanation of the Lord's Day, the burning of the Bible in open day, and infidel lectures in the public streets.

Calvin, however, felt little difficulty in this matter. His views were to establish the gospel in high places, and give it supreme sway over the minds and actions of all men who came within its reach. In conjunction, therefore, with Farel, he drew up a short confession of faith in twenty-one articles, which also comprised some regulations respecting church government. Among the latter was the right of excommunication, which became subsequently a formidable weapon in Calvin's hand for the punishment of evil doers. To this confession of faith Farel appended the Ten Commandments, and in this amended form it was laid before the council of Two Hundred, who ordered it to be printed, read in St. Peter's Church every Sunday, and the people sworn to the observance of it.

But Popery had too long prevailed at Geneva, and had taken too deep and wide a root to be speedily eradicated. Almost a French city, it had a great deal of French manners, and French morality, and was not only a very gay, lighthearted, and careless seat of pleasure, but terribly dissolute and licentious. Rome cares little now, and cared still less then for the morals of her devotees as long as they worship at her altars. A drunken Irishman is a good Catholic if he do but attend mass, take off his hat to the priest, say an Ave to the Virgin Mary, and hate all heretics. Dancing and music, the gambling table, and the masquerade, feasting and reveling every Sunday and holiday, Rome tolerated, if not encouraged, at Geneva, as long as mass was duly said at the altar and the convent vesper bell nightly tinkled over the blue lake. But there were darker crimes behind the midnight mask and holiday revel. Drunkenness, blasphemy, adultery, licensed prostitution, and the most dissolute profligacy, in which the popish clergy were not the least backward, made the city a very sink of iniquity. It was not likely then that these lovers of pleasure, many of whom still continued in Geneva, sunk as they were up to the neck in profligacy, would readily submit to the yoke which Calvin and Farel were binding on their necks.

For these men of God did not lop off merely a few twigs of the Upas tree of sin. They hacked and hewed down sin root and branch, and smote the Amalekites hip and thigh. Not only the grosser crimes just mentioned were severely punished, but cards, dancing, plays, masquerades, were all absolutely prohibited; all holidays except Sunday were abolished, and that observed with all the strictness of our Puritan ancestors. All the church bells were dismantled and silenced; the citizens were strictly enjoined to attend divine service, and be at home by 9 o'clock in the evening. Fancy an English town, a gay and fashionable watering place, such as Brighton, Cheltenham, or Leamington, subjected to these regulations, and then fancy whether our good Protestants would relish their cards, their balls, their late supper parties, their plays and concerts, their races and raffles, their coursing and hunting, all swept away at a stroke, they made to hear sermons upon election and predestination several times a week, and all to be in doors before the clock struck nine.

Geneva, the gay, the dissipated Geneva, where mirth and pleasure had long run riot, began to rebel against this bit in her jaws, and a formidable party was secretly organized to resist these stringent measures. To show how Satan can invest the worst deeds with the holiest names, these lovers of all ungodliness named themselves, "Brothers in Christ." "Libertines" was the name given them with far greater justice by the lovers of the gospel at Geneva. Our limits will not allow us, nor indeed is it necessary to detail their intrigues and the artful manner in which they disguised their real intentions. Suffice it to say, that they soon obtained political power in the executive Council, and thus brought the Genevese government under their influence. They dare not openly avow that their end was to restore the ancient reign of riot, but intending, doubtless, to undermine or eject Calvin and Farel by surer methods, they took their stand on some points in which the reformed church at Berne differed from that at Geneva, and required the ministers to conform to them. The two main points were using unleavened bread in the communion, and celebrating four festivals in the year.

As Calvin and Farel would not, however, consent to conform to these points, and even refused to administer the Lord's Supper at Easter at all on account of the debauchery and insubordination of the people, the Council forbade them to mount the pulpit. Regardless of this prohibition, and determined to obey God rather than man, they both preached twice at their respective churches, but did not celebrate the communion. Their open disobedience to the express orders of the government brought matters at once to a crisis. On the following morning the Council met, and passed sentence of banishment on both Farel and Calvin, issuing at the same time an order that they must quit the city in three days. The Council of Two Hundred and the General Assembly, the two fountains of all power at Geneva, convened especially for the purpose, confirmed the sentence of the Executive Council; and their decision being without appeal, submission was their only alternative. The exiles simply exclaiming, "It is better to serve God than man," and turning their backs on the city which had thus cast them out, went first to Berne, and thence proceeded to Basle, where they were received with the greatest cordiality. But neither tarried there long, and were soon separated, Farel repairing to Neufchatel, and Calvin to Strasburg, a free and imperial city on the Rhine, where the Reformation was firmly established, where he was received with open arms, appointed professor of theology, and a pulpit and congregation assigned him.

Meanwhile at Geneva, matters were in a strange ferment. The party which had banished Calvin and Farel had gained a triumph and were determined to make the most of it. The dancers, the gamblers, and the drunkards were pleased enough, and soon restored the ancient days when sin ran down the streets as water. But the exiled ministers had a strong party that knew and loved the truth, which daily gathered power and influence. The ministers who had succeeded Farel and Calvin were unable to maintain their

ground, and left the city. Riot everywhere prevailed; strong attempts were made to re-introduce Popery; and confusion and disorder shook the city to the center. The hand of God now began to lift itself up against his adversaries. Jean Philippe, the Captain General and head of the Libertine Party, was publicly executed for killing a man in a riot.

One of the magistrates who assisted to banish Calvin, and told him "the city gates were wide enough for him," broke his own neck in trying to escape from the officers of justice out of a window. Two others were obliged to fly on charges of treason; and thus the Council became purged of Calvin's enemies. Swayed as it were from above, and feeling that he alone could restore order to their troubled and disturbed city, the hearts of the Council and a great majority of the citizens longed for Calvin's return. On the 24th of April, 1538, the sentence of banishment had been passed; on the 20th of October, 1540, the Council passed a resolution that he should be invited to come back. Calvin's heart was really at Geneva; but mindful of the troubles he had suffered there, and perhaps not being willing too soon to be won, he respectfully declined their invitation. In addition to this, as he was highly honored at Strasburg, where the Lord was remarkably blessing his labors, had lately taken to himself a wife and was deeply immersed in his beloved studies, he had every inducement there to remain. Undeterred by his refusal, again the Council pressed him most earnestly to return; again Calvin pleaded his engagements at Strasburg.

Unable to prevail with him, the Council sent a circular letter to the governments of Berne, Basle, and Zurich to request their influence in procuring his return:† Farel, Bucer, and other influential ministers urged his compliance. None but he, it was felt, could raise the sinking church at Geneva, or rule the people in that riotous city. Overcome at length by these powerful persuasions, seeing, doubtless, the hand of God in them, and that Geneva was his divinely appointed post, Calvin yielded the point and consented to return. His return, under these circumstances, was a triumph of truth over error, and of godliness over ungodliness; and thus his very exile gave him a power and an authority subsequently at Geneva which he could not have had without it. How evident in all this is the wonder-working hand of God. A mounted herald was despatched to escort him from Strasburg, and a carriage and three horses sent to bring his wife and furniture.

On the 13th of September, 1541, he again entered the gates of Geneva. The Council received him with every mark of affection and respect, besought him ever to remain with them, provided him with a house and garden attached, settled on him a fixed salary, and, what we may believe Calvin valued more than all, prepared him a pulpit in St. Peter's Church, so arranged that the whole congregation might hear him with ease. From this period until the day of his decease, (May 27th, 1564,) a space of nearly 23 years, did this zealous and godly servant of the Lord labor at Geneva. The following was the ordinary routine of his labors. Besides the Lord's day, he preached every day during each alternate week; thrice a week he gave lectures in divinity; presided in the consistory or meeting of the ministers every Thursday; and lectured at St. Peter's Church every Friday evening. On the alternate week he chiefly devoted himself to his studies, commencing at five or six in the morning, and continuing at work nearly all day.

We cannot pursue his history during an eventful period of twenty-three years. We hasten, therefore, to his end; those latter days of his life on earth, on which a peculiar halo of grace and glory was shed. For several years his bodily sufferings and afflictions had been great; but about 1561, a complication of disorders fell on his earthly tabernacle. A continual colic, incessant vomitings, loss of appetite, sleeplessness, and tormenting headaches, pressed him sore. But worse ills, asthma, gout, and stone, followed in their rear. Still he continued his severe labors, writing commentaries on the Scripture, and preaching, though obliged to be carried to the church in a chair. On the 6th of February, 1564, he

preached his last sermon, though he still occasionally addressed a few words to the congregation. But, amid all his severe sufferings, no complaint escaped his lips, except that sometimes he would look up, and say, "Lord, how long?"

He was now very sensible that his earthly pilgrimage was drawing to a close. Still he pursued his literary labors; and when Beza begged of him to give up dictating, or at all events writing, his only answer was, "What? Would you have the Lord find me idle?" On the 10th of March he was publicly prayed for in the churches by order of the government, and on the 18th, the Council sent him a present of twenty-five crowns, which, however, he refused to accept, assigning as his reason that he was no longer able to work, and therefore had no right to be paid. On the 2nd of April he was carried to church, stayed the sermon, and received the Lord's Supper from the hand of Beza. He joined in the hymn with a tremulous voice, and though his countenance bore on it the evident stamp of death, yet was it lighted up with the radiant beams of joy and peace. On the 25th of April he made his will, and on the 26th the Council assembled at his house. We could wish that our limits admitted the insertion of even a portion of his grave and wise address to the executive government of Geneva, received by them as it was with the greatest respect and affection as well as many tears. On the 28th all the Genevese ministers met at his house. There he addressed most earnestly and affectionately, exhorting them to persevere in the good work to which the Lord had called them, to avoid all dispute and strife, and walk in mutual love and affection. He bade them firmly maintain his doctrine, and uphold his discipline, and appealed to his own experience that the Lord had blessed both him and his labors. He assured them that he had always lived with them, and was now departing from them in the bonds of the truest and sincerest love; begged their forgiveness for any peevish expressions which had escaped his lips during his illness; returned them hearty thanks for bearing his burdens; and, amid many tears on their side, shook hands separately with, and bade farewell to them all. His last letter was written to Farel to dissuade him from coming from Neufchatel to have a last interview. Our readers will peruse it with interest.

"Farewell, my best and truest brother! and since it is God's will that you remain behind me in the world, live mindful of our friendship, which as it was useful to the church of God, so the fruit of it awaits us in heaven. Pray, do not fatigue yourself on my account. It is with difficulty I draw my breath, and expect that every moment will be my last. It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is the reward of his followers both in life or death. Again, farewell with my brethren.--Geneva, 2nd of May, 1564."

Farel came, however, to see him; but we are not favored with the particulars of the interview, which, between two brethren so long and so warmly united, and both sinking into the grave, worn out with suffering and toil, must have been most deeply interesting. The days that now remained to him on earth, Calvin spent in almost continual prayer, and ejaculating sentences from the Scriptures. On the 19th of May he took finally to his bed, where he lay in much bodily weakness and suffering until the 27th. About eight o'clock in the evening of that day, the signs of approaching dissolution appeared. Beza, who had not long left him, was sent for, but too late to see him expire. Before his friend could reach his bed-side, his ransomed soul had passed from earth to heaven, apparently without a struggle, as he looked like one who had fallen into a deep sleep, without a trace of expiring agony.

Thus lived and thus died this great and good man, this eminent servant of God, this memorable champion of the truth of the gospel, this learned and godly Reformer, John Calvin. On that night and the following day, according to the testimony of Beza, Geneva seemed plunged into universal mourning. The state lamented the loss of its most distinguished counselor; the church of its beloved pastor; the university of its unwearied and able teacher; the poor of their firm friend and sympathizing succourer; the ministers of a

wise and affectionate fellow-laborer; and a large circle of private Christians of their spiritual guide and father. Nor was the feeling of grief and lamentation confined to Geneva. The whole Reformed church, that had been so long and so deeply indebted to his labors, and a large and increasing band of correspondents, whose faithful and affectionate counselor he long had been, joined in lamenting his loss.

That Calvin had his faults, his warmest friends and greatest admirers cannot deny. His language at times against his adversaries, though it must be borne in mind that it was the prevailing evil of the day, was exceedingly violent and intemperate. "A beast, a pig, a vagabond, a scurvy knave, an impostor, a foul-mouthed-dog;" such are some of the epithets that fell from his pen. Castellio, against whom these angry invectives were launched, thus pointedly reproves Calvin for using them--"Even were I as truly all these things as I really am not, yet it ill becomes so learned a man as yourself, the teacher of so many others, to degrade so excellent an intellect by so foul and sordid abuse."

He was also stern and unforgiving on points where his own authority was in question, and ruled, both in church and state, with too much of an iron hand. The times were, however, peculiar, and a silken glove was not adapted for the turbulent city of Geneva: nor were the principles of liberty understood there as now with us, with whom they have been the growth of centuries. The fairest way is to look at the result of his rule. That he found Geneva full of riot and turbulence, a very sink of sin and immorality, and left it at his death a seat of order and quiet, of morality and good government, and a favored spot of truth in doctrine and godliness in life, all must admit who are not blinded by a spirit of prejudice and error.

But his best and most enduring monument is the fruit of his pen. There he peculiarly shone. His great and varied learning, his logical, accurate mind, his deep knowledge of the scriptures, his ardent love of truth, his clear and forcible style, and the strength of his arguments, all combined to give his writings a power and prevalence in his own age, of which we still feel the effects, but can hardly realize the conception. His writings, it is true, are now little read, and have become in a measure superseded by more modern works. It is good, however, to go at times to the fountain-head; and Dr. Cole has thus conferred a benefit on the church by translating and publishing the work at the head of the present article.

Many speak as if Calvin invented those doctrines which are so frequently called by his name, and others as if he first discovered them in the Bible. He did neither the one nor the other. Before Calvin had birth or being, they had a place in the scriptures of truth; and before the Bible itself had birth or being, they had a place in the heart of God. The grand doctrine of election was not left for Calvin to discover in the Bible. It is not a faint, feeble glimmer in the word of truth, an obscure doctrine, which, with much painstaking and piecing of text to text, may at length be dimly descried lurking in some intricate passages, but a ray of light that shines through and illuminates the whole scripture from the first promise made in Eden to the close of the sacred canon.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jc-philpot/john-calvin/>

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