

Information derived and adapted from <https://www.gotquestions.org/John-Calvin.html>

John Calvin (1509–1564) was a French theologian who was instrumental in the Protestant Reformation and who continues to hold wide influence today in theology, education, and politics.

Context & Situation

- Wealthy tradesmen, tired of financial exploitation, were shifting the political power away from both the feudal lords and the Roman Catholic Church
- Economically, socially, and numerically, Europe was still recovering from the Black Death 150 years earlier.
- The authority of the papacy had been split between as many as three different popes the century before, and the popes since then had been amazingly corrupt and publicly hypocritical.
 - Most concerning to the general populace was the Roman Church's tendency to fund wars, works of art and architecture, and lavish lifestyles by convincing congregants of their need to buy indulgences. If you want your loved ones to get out of purgatory, said the pope, it will cost you. Or, what might be more appealing, you can get away with some sins yourself, *if you buy an indulgence*.
 - Such ecclesiastical abuses led to the outcry of the Reformers—Luther in Germany, Zwingli in Switzerland
- Forefathers of the Protestant Reformation such as Wyclif, Hus, and Tyndale focused more on having a Bible in the vernacular and combatting ecclesiastical abuse than theological matters such as *Sola Scriptura* (needed because the papal infallibility proved to be very fallible) or the nature of the Eucharist.
 - But in a theocratic world based on the total authority of the popes and church councils, dissention from the Catholic interpretation of Scripture was tantamount to treason.
 - The climate was somewhat chaotic with Rome trying to wrest control back from various factions who championed autonomy of rule and religion, promoted adherence to the Scriptures, and tried to prevent the church from taking their money.
 - John Calvin's contribution was to organize and consolidate the theological and biblical reasons for rejecting the Roman Church, and he brilliantly developed his concepts into a complete theological viewpoint.

Biography

- John Calvin's father originally meant for him to be a priest, but when the elder's fortunes changed, he decided his son would be more stable as a lawyer.
 - The training John received both in law and the humanities served him well in theology.
- The invasion of Constantinople pushed Eastern scholars—and their literature—west; the printing press made those records available to Western scholars.
 - When Western scholars realized how the originals differed from their copies, they developed the practice of textual criticism, which we still use to validate documents and determine when they were written and by whom
- The details of Calvin's conversion from Catholicism to nascent Protestantism are a mystery.
 - Calvin wrote of his spiritual conversion as taking place in 1532.
 - In 1536, Calvin solidified what he had learned into the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—a defense of the Reformers from a theological standpoint.
 - As the Roman Catholic Church's authority continued to be threatened, Catholic authorities struck back.
 - Calvin fled France.
 - On a detour through Geneva, Switzerland, a friend, William Farel, persuaded Calvin to stay and teach, although John was a lawyer, not a minister.
 - The rich bourgeoisie of Geneva wanted to break with Rome for financial reasons and declared the city Protestant, but they had inadequate church leadership.
 - They welcomed Calvin up to the point where he started actual reforms to match his theology.
 - Calvin and Farel set out to rewrite church polity and policies and wound up causing a riot over the use of unleavened bread in communion. They were removed from Geneva, and Calvin went to pastor a French congregation in Strasbourg.
- While pastoring, Calvin found time to write in Strasbourg. He rewrote his apologetics book in the format of a catechism and wrote most of a commentary series based on the Greek Septuagint instead of the Latin Vulgate.
 - He eventually expanded his little treatise, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* from six short chapters to four books.

- Then, the political scene in Geneva changed.
 - Three years into Calvin's exile, a popular Catholic cardinal wrote an open letter inviting Geneva to return to Catholicism and giving several arguments for why they should.
 - The city council asked Calvin to respond, and he wrote a masterful letter in reply, answering the religious arguments and defending the Protestant leaders. Geneva stayed Protestant, and they brought Calvin back and agreed to his reforms.
- The city council alternately supported Calvin and abandoned him depending on the political climate of the moment—until the unfortunate incident of Michael Servetus.
 - Michael Servetus was a Spanish doctor and outspoken heretic who came to Basel and then Strasbourg to escape ecclesiastical authorities. He denounced the Trinity and denied the deity of Christ, putting him at odds with both Catholics and Protestants.
 - The Inquisitions of both Spain and France condemned him to death. He was finally caught and held in Geneva.
 - Calvin's secretary provided a list of accusations of heresy, which were confirmed by several other theologians, both Protestant and Catholic.
 - The consensus was strong on both sides: Servetus was a heretic and should be burned at the stake—the standard and widespread punishment for heresy—although Calvin requested a more humane beheading.
 - Finally, the court had no choice but to convict and execute Servetus. The Calvinists and the Catholics both wanted him dead, but the Calvinists got to him first.
 - Although the matter of Servetus—the sole execution of a heretic in Calvin's lifetime—besmirched Calvin's reputation, Calvin became the unchallenged defender of the faith, and his polity was soon after accepted in Geneva.

Beliefs

- Both Calvin and Luther valued unity in the church, their main disagreement being over communion.
 - Luther asserted that the body and blood of Christ dwells with the bread and wine without changing the physical properties of the elements;
 - Zwingli believed that the Lord's Supper is a symbolic memorial.

- Calvin took a middle-of-the-road approach, teaching that communion is indeed a memorial yet also a way to “feed” (spiritually) on Christ. Calvin wrote that communion is an “aid to our faith related to the preaching of the gospel . . . an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his goodwill toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith; and we in turn attest our piety towards him in the presence of the Lord and of his angels and before men” (*Institutes* IV.xiv.1).
 - In other words, taking communion aids our faith, helps preach the gospel, seals God’s promises, bolsters our weaknesses, and allows us to attest to our fidelity to God.
- Luther and Calvin agreed on predestination.
 - It was their followers who widened the rift between their teachers, making more of a divide between Lutheranism and Reformed theology.
 - Even Jacobus Arminius, after whom Arminianism, the anti-Calvinism sect, is named, praised Calvin’s commentaries and recommended them to his students, saying that Calvin was “incomparable in the interpretation of Scripture” (cited by Thomas Smyth in *Calvin and His Enemies: A Memoir of the Life, Character, and Principles of Calvin*, Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009, p. 24–25).

Lasting Impact

- Calvin’s writings had a wide influence, as his system of theology was taken up by many:
 - Puritans in England
 - Presbyterians in Scotland
 - Huguenots in France
 - Pilgrims in America
- John Calvin is also remembered today for the school he established in Geneva and the advances in education he promoted.
 - Calvin’s innovations in education include the formation of the first public school. During the Middle Ages, education was limited to the elite; only the aristocracy were schooled.
 - Calvin changed that, ensuring that the general populace received a tuition-free, classical, liberal arts education.
- To that end, Calvin established an academy with seven grades and a seminary beyond that. Both schools became models for similar institutions across Europe and are now considered forerunners of the modern public school movement.

QUESTIONS? Next week: Calvin’s Theology