

A brief life of John Calvin 1509-64

John Calvin's reputation has suffered as a result of criticism by subsequent generations who have very little grasp of what he actually said about predestination and who condemn him for failing to prevent the execution of Michael Servetus. Studying his life and thought will probably not convince those who have nurtured feelings of animosity towards the Genevan Reformer. But for those who come to it more openly, then their appreciation of Calvin, his greatness as a thinker and his genius as an organiser, will certainly be enhanced.

Calvin was born (Jehan Cauvin) on 10 July 1509 in Noyon, Picardy. The context is important. For some time the king, Francis I, had protected 'humanists' and 'evangelicals', but in the 1530s he seemed arbitrarily to change his mind, adopting policies that were intolerant towards the Reformation and its protagonists. This is the background to Calvin's birth and upbringing. His mother was deeply pious and inculcated the Catholic values (or even superstitions) into her young son (he remembered having kissed a relic associated with St Anne). She died while he was still a boy. His father intended that he should have a career in the church and sent him for the appropriate education, until Gérard Cauvin fell out with the chapter at Noyon cathedral and sent his son to be trained in jurisprudence instead. In the early 1530s, Calvin underwent a 'conversion', about which he was always reticent, but which convinced him that his life was not his own but belonged to God. While this impressed upon him the importance of election in the Christian scheme, it more importantly led him to commit the rest of his days to promote and expedite the Reformation. But his conversion coincided with Francis's violent suppression of the 'Lutherans', and Calvin fled to Basel where he met, among others, Guillaume Farel, Pierre Viret, Heinrich Bullinger and Martin Bucer. It was relationships with these men that would prove decisive for Calvin and for much of what would become Protestant Europe. Nevertheless, Calvin's aim at this time was to become a humanist scholar, using his learning primarily to encourage reform in his native France. To that end he published the first edition of his *Institutes* in 1536 while he lived in exile in Basel. As he passed through Geneva in July 1536 he was persuaded by Farel to stay and help with the work of reform in that city. He spoke of this in providential terms: it was 'as if God had from heaven laid his mighty hand on me'.¹

Calvin and Farel came into increasingly bitter conflict with the secular powers in the city and this led finally to their expulsion in April 1538. Farel eventually settled in

¹ Quoted from Willem van't Spijker, *Calvin: A Brief Guide to His Life and Thought*, tr. Lyle D. Bierma (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), p. 35.

Neuchâtel while Calvin settled in Strasbourg with Bucer. It was Bucer who convinced him that he could not spend his life in pursuit of learning but had also a duty of care to a congregation. Calvin took pastoral charge of the French refugees in the city. He continued to develop his own expository method which he described as 'brevity with clarity', in sharp contrast to Bucer's comprehensiveness, even verbosity. In 1540 he married the widow Idelette de Bure and in the following year he was persuaded, contrary to his own wishes, that it was God's will that he return to Geneva. 'I would rather die a hundred deaths than on that cross, on which I would daily perish a thousand times over,' he famously remarked.²

Calvin remained in Geneva until his death on 27 May 1564 and during that time he made a vital contribution to the Reformation in that city and also became increasingly influential in other parts of Europe. Nevertheless, he had anything but an easy ride. Between 1541 and 1546, he was central to organizing both ecclesiastical and political structures in the city, finally ensuring that the city conformed to the pattern he and Farel had suggested in 1537, a plan which at that time led to their expulsion. Between 1546 and 1555, Calvin endured virtually constant opposition from prominent citizens, from those such as Bolsec and Trolliet who opposed his views on predestination, and the affair associated with the name of Servetus. It was not Calvin but the Genevan magistracy which condemned Servetus and the decision to execute him as a heretic was supported by Bern, Zurich, Basel and Strasbourg, while Catholic Vienne had condemned him to death and, when Servetus escaped, that city burned him in effigy. Nevertheless, Calvin himself had opposed Servetus and famously wrote to Farel on 13 February 1546, saying that:

If I consent he will come here, but I will not give my word; for if he comes here, if my authority is worth anything, I will never permit him to depart alive (Latin: *Si venerit, modo valeat mea autoritas, vivum exire nunquam patiar*).³

He further wrote to Farel on 20 August 1553, about a week after Servetus' arrest, saying:

... after he [Servetus] had been recognized, I thought he should be detained. My friend Nicolas summoned him on a capital charge, offering himself as a security according to the *lex talionis*. On the following day he adduced against him forty written charges. He at first sought to evade them. Accordingly we

² Ibid., p. 65.

³ W. Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, 11 vols (New York: s.n., 1957), vol. VI, part 2.

were summoned. He impudently reviled me, just as if he regarded me as obnoxious to him. I answered him as he deserved ... of the man's effrontery I will say nothing; but such was his madness that he did not hesitate to say that devils possessed divinity; yea, that many gods were in individual devils, inasmuch as a deity had been substantially communicated to those equally with wood and stone. I hope that sentence of death will at least be passed on him; but I desired that the severity of the punishment be mitigated.⁴

As he was not a citizen of Geneva, the city authorities only had authority to banish Servetus. However, having taken advice from other Swiss Reformed Cantons, all of which universally condemned him and sought the suppression of his teaching, Servetus was brought to trial, with the city magistrates seeking the death penalty. Calvin asked the City Council to decapitate rather than burn him at the stake, but he was opposed by the group known as the 'Libertines', who opposed almost everything Calvin attempted to do. On 24 October, Servetus was condemned to death by Perrin, a 'Libertine' and he was burnt at the stake, just outside the city, three days later.

The period 1555 to 1564 shows that Calvin had ridden the storm as his pattern of discipline and structures were developed, as the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* was published, and the Academy established (initially to train students in theology but, after Calvin's death, adding a faculty of law and of medicine, the foundation of what would become the University of Geneva).

Theologically, Calvin disliked scholasticism, and developed the thought of Luther and Bucer. He was committed to the authority of scripture and the belief that word and spirit must be held together. Other prominent aspects of his theology include union with Christ and the sovereignty of God, which led him to consider that predestination was both an aspect of the pastoral nature of the good news and simply a logical, but theological, conclusion. Calvin's work was influential especially in the Netherlands, Scotland (where Calvin was interpreted and elaborated upon by Knox), England (where Calvinism was stronger among the Puritans than with those who laid the foundations of the established church) the Palatinate and Heidelberg. Calvinism exists in the twenty first century, though it is characterized by unity in diversity rather than a shared dogmatic basis.

⁴ Calvin to William Farel, August 20, 1553, in Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), pp. 158–159.

Calvin could be bad-tempered, stubborn, cantankerous, even petulant, but he was also an astute theologian who was convinced that the pursuit of theology was a pastoral rather than a philosophical task. As such he was a theologian of the church, with the Body of Christ and its essential unity as his fundamental concern. The mere adoption of his system is, of course, unthinkable, but reflection on his insights might well assist the development of a constructive approach among contemporary Reformed Christians.