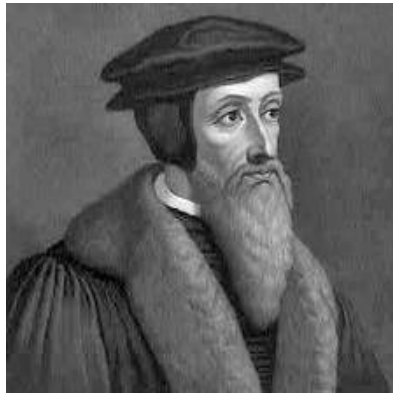


## CHRISTIAN RESOURCES

### GREAT PREACHERS

#### THE LIFE OF JOHN CALVIN 1509 - 1564



By: Bishop Warwick Cole-Edwardes

## **INTRODUCTION**

Before endeavouring to attempt the almost impossible which is in some way to commit the greatness of the French Theologian and Reformer John Calvin to paper, I would like to introduce a document that I feel will set the tone for the task at hand, a document that will establish the true greatness of John Calvin, a greatness ordained by God and that few other men, the likes of the Apostle Paul, Tertullian, Luther, and Whitfield can claim to hold, A greatness achieved by putting their lives on the line for what they believed and a greatness that changed the course of Christianity forever.

## **REPORT OF VENETIAN AMBASSADOR. 1561**

Unless it otherwise pleases the Almighty, religious affairs will soon be in an evil case in France, because there is not one single province uncontaminated. Indeed in some provinces, such as Normandy, almost the whole of Brittany, Touraine, Poitou, Gascony, and a great part of Languedoc, of Dauphiny, and of Provence, comprising three-fourths of the kingdom, congregations and meetings, which they call assemblies, are held; and in these assemblies they read and preach, according to the rites and uses of Geneva, without any respect either to the ministers or the King or the commandments of the King himself.

This contagion has penetrated so deeply that it affects every class of persons, and, what appears more strange even the ecclesiastical body itself. I do not mean only priests, friars and nuns, for there are but few monasteries that are not corrupted, but even bishops and many of the principal probates who hitherto had not shown any such disposition; and it is only on account of the rigorous execution of the law that other persons besides the populace have not disclosed themselves, because they have restrained themselves for the time being from fear of the loss of their property and lives. But your Serenity must learn that while the people and the populace show fervent devotion by frequenting the churches and observing the Catholic rites, all other classes are supposed to be disaffected, and the nobility perhaps more than any other class, and, particularly, persons of forty years of age and under. If these disaffected individuals continue to attend mass and the Divine Offices, and externally to practice Catholic rites, they do so for show and from fear; because when they either are, or believe themselves to be unobserved, they avoid and even fly from the mass above all things, and also from the churches as far as they are able, and more so since it became known that by imprisonment, chastisement and burnings, no remedy was found. It has now been determined not to proceed against any disaffected persons unless they venture to preach, persuade and to take part publicly in congregations and assemblies. All other such persons are allowed to live, and some have

been set at liberty, and released from the prisons of Paris and of other parts of the kingdom. A great number of these last have still remained in the kingdom preaching and speaking publicly, and boasting that they have gained their cause against the Papists, as they delight to style their adversaries; ... Your Serenity will hardly believe the influence and the great power which the principal minister of Geneva, by name Calvin, a Frenchman, and a native of Picardy, possesses in this kingdom, he is a man of extraordinary authority, who by his mode of life, his doctrines and his writings rises superior to all the rest; and it is impossible to believe the enormous sums of money which are secretly sent to him from France to maintain his power. It is sufficient to add that if God does not interfere, there is great and imminent danger that one of two things will happen in this kingdom; either that the truce, which is desired and sought publicly, will end by the heretics having churches wherein they can preach, read and perform their rites, according to their doctrine, without hindrance, and in like manner as they obtained churches by command of the late King given at Fontainebleau, at the end of August, in compliance with a petition presented to him, or else, obedience to the Pope and to the Catholic rites enforced, and shall have to resort to violence and imbrue our hands in noble blood. For these reasons I foresee a manifest and certain division in the kingdom, and civil war as a consequence; and this will be the cause of the ruin both of the kingdom and of religion, because upon a change in religion, a change in the State necessarily follows.

The organizer of Modern Presbyterianism, John Calvin was born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon in Picardy, an old cathedral town in Northern France, fifty miles north of Paris. His father Gerhard Calvin, had worked himself up to a position of influence there and held several offices in the established medieval church and society. His father acted as a lawyer for the church, and intended his son first for a career in theology, and then law. His mother was Jeanne Lefranc, was a pious and generous woman from noble Wallonian family.

The outstanding gifted boy received a wide and vigorous education of colleges and universities in Paris, Orleans and Bourges, that all started with his first education privately together with the sons of a noble family at Montmort Castle. This education was partly funded from church benefices or scholarships, generally intended for aspiring priests, a mark of the medieval Church that from Pope to layman, Church money was often and openly misappropriated to pay for everything from harlots to higher education.

Calvin with his quick and analytical mind, did well with his studies and in the years 1524 - 1528 Calvin received an exceptional education in formal logic at the College Montaigu at Paris, which was still working with scholastic methods and was filled by a strict ascetic spirit. However he widened the narrow limits of this training by intensive private study in various fields. Originally he had been destined for an ecclesiastical career – at the age of thirteen he was granted a living – but after graduating from the faculty of arts, he changed to jurisprudence at the wish of his father and by his own inclination.

In 1528, however, opposition led to Calvin's banishment.

At Orleans and Bourges he heard the most famous law scholars of the medieval and Renaissance schools, and in 1531 he completed this special study with the degree in Licentiate. During this time Calvin also devoted himself to more general humanistic and literary studies. A fruit of this was his commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, which appeared in 1532, he published this doctoral dissertation on a classical work of law from the pre-Christian Roman period and had hoped that its publication would gain him entry into the very heart of university scholarship, but although successful Calvin's book remained widely unread.

Most important, however, for his entire later life was Calvin's contact at this time with those evangelical and reform-minded circles of France which gathered around the humanist Faber Stapulensis and studied not only the Bible in its original languages but also the writings of Martin Luther, whose Ninety-five Thesis against indulgences had appeared in 1517

In the circles of the Lutherans Calvin became an evangelical Christian by a gradual development and showed the same disdain as many for the corruption and superstition of the medieval Church, but this cynicism grew when his father died, excommunicated from the church and the help it offered towards eternal life. The excommunication was not directly over a matter of morality or Doctrine, but over the local bishops' disappointment with the way the elder Calvin had wound up a deceased estate. For falling out, Calvin's father was confined to the flames of hell. Along with this Calvin himself wrote: "First I was devoted to this superstition of Papism so obstinately that it was not easy to draw myself out of this abyss. But by a sudden turning God subdued my heart to obedience."

Unfortunately it is not possible to find out precisely when the final break with Rome took place, whether as early as 1527 or not until 1532. It is however, quite certain that Calvin at the end of the year 1533, after a revolutionary reforming speech (on beliefs which could only be discussed in secret) by his school friend Nicolaus Cop, which possibly had been inspired by him, and which had sounded a little too Lutheran in flavour for the authorities had to leave Paris in full flight because of persecution.

He lived under pseudonyms in Angouleme, Nerac, Poitiers, Orleans and Claix, and spent much time with a circle of prominent French Scholars, who in the comparative safety of southern France were now more openly Protestant. But as the pressure upon the evangelicals in France became stronger and stronger due to the call for reformation and Calvin became one of the suspects hunted by the authorities, he finally renounced his scholarship and left his homeland and turned to Strassburg and Basel in Switzerland.

Here he worked as a scholar assisting local reformers, came to know various leaders of the Reformation - Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, Wolfgang Capito, Simon Grynaeus, and Oswald Myconius. Above all in 1536 he completed the first edition of his theological masterpiece that was to become the text book of the reformation, the first *Institutio Religionis Christianae* (The Institute of the Christian Religion) This book was written with some obvious leanings towards Luther's Catechisms, and had primarily the two fold purpose of presenting a short summary of the evangelical teaching and of

defending the persecuted French Evangelicals against the charge that they like the Anabaptists in Germany, were rebelling against any kind of state domination. For apologetic reasons Calvin prefaced his book with an extensive and brilliant dedication to the French King Francis I, and launched himself into the ranks of a Protestant theologian

In the spring of 1536, the 25 year old John Calvin spent some time in Italy at the court of the Dutchess Renata of Ferrara, and in the fall he went for the last time to Noyon. He then wanted to go to Strassburg to return to the scholarly life, but since the war between Emperor Charles V and Francis I of France – which had in the meantime broken out anew – barred the way through Lorraine, he had to travel via Geneva. He intended to stay there only one night, but, his presence became known, however, to William Farel, the fiery and charismatic missionary of the reformed faith among the French speaking Cantons of Switzerland, who amidst much civic and religious turmoil, had gone over to the Reformation by the vote of the City Council a short time before. Farel, who saw in his young guest a gift from God and knew how precarious was the hold the reformation had on Geneva, and the need for a strong teaching ministry to consolidate this start, asked and finally besought Calvin, who had become known in scholarly circles through his book, to serve as a teacher in Geneva. Calvin never forgot that encounter, as his later record of it shows.

*“Farel, burning as he was with a marvellous zeal to promote the gospel, instantly put forth all his efforts to detain me, when he saw that he was gaining nothing by entreaties, he went so far as imprecation, that it might please God to curse the rest and quietness I was seeking.... Which word so horrified and shook me that I desisted from the journey I had undertaken.”*

And so it was appropriate that the author of the *Institutio* should take over the teaching of Holy Scripture and by this action show the city, which was still in the most modest beginnings of the Reformation, that reformation meant not only political freedom from Svoyn the Bishop, but also subordination under the promises and demands of the Gospel, the pair set out thoroughly to reform the Genevan Church by a complete overhaul of its structures and administration so as to give centre place to clear teaching of the Bible.

If Calvin at first refused to take over this task, it was because his own plans as well as his shy nature had made him reluctant to do so, but once convinced that God was really commanding him to further the Reformation in Geneva, he took up the given task of teacher and preacher of the Holy Scriptures and immediately began to preach and lecture from the Holy Scriptures for ministers and townsfolk alike with all his strength and with the exemplary effort of a life which knew only service. His immediate intention was a complete reformation involving a thorough physical and spiritual reshaping of the city. As a part of their reforms, Farel and Calvin proposed a disciplinary system which would not only control the quality of the ministers who were in charge of the various churches in and around Geneva, but also discipline the townsfolk as well in matters of morals and beliefs. The idea and practice of such discipline was hardly new, and had existed in Christian Europe for over a thousand years, but now it looked as if it was to become a practical fact, binding on all citizens, including the ruling classes who sat on the city

council. Added to the personal ramifications that the new system had for the city fathers, was a real political problem. Who in the end was to have final say in religious matters, ministers or lay folk?, who was to have final say in the matter of excommunication, of barring unrepentant and notorious public sinners from Holy Communion. Farel and Calvin insisted that the Church Council consisting of elected lay people and ministers, should have final say. The Town council said it as the highest authority in the city should have the final say over who was to be excommunicated, and neither would give way to the other. And so after three years this plan was frustrated, as much by the pride of the Genevan city council, who wanted to continue to assert their newly found ultimate control over religion, as by Calvin's outrageousness, and in 1538 Calvin and Farel were expelled from the city.

From Geneva, Calvin went to Strassburg where he stayed for three years and Farel to Neuchatel where he stayed, never to return. In Strassburg Calvin was asked by a leading reformer Martin Bucer, to take up a lecturing post at the university, and to pastor a French refugee church. In addition to this, he there had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with the form of church which he himself desired - a truly evangelical church and worship order with church discipline and the singing of psalms. He also had the opportunity to participate in the religious discussions at Hagenau, Worms, and Regensburg called together by Charles V, and publishing Bible expositions and a second and very much enlarged edition of the Institutio. A further important service was rendered in the refutation and winning back of numerous Anabaptists. While Calvin was living in Strassburg he was married to Idelette de Bure, the widow of a converted Anabaptist, in 1540

In the beginning of 1539, shortly after his banishment, he had written at the request of the Bernese a brilliant reply to Cardinal Sadolet, who had tried, by a flattering pastoral letter, to win back the Genevans to the Roman Church. After 1540 internal difficulties led the city to extend an invitation to Calvin to return to Geneva but not Farel. In the autumn of 1541 he finally accepted this offer with some fear and anxiety and on the condition that he be allowed to introduce what he had previously demanded - the return of a church on the basis of a strict church order, a fixed order of worship, a new catechism and that Ecclesiastical Ordinances be drafted that defined the relative roles of the Church and the Council in the religious care of citizens. With this the second period of Calvin's activities in Geneva began. Since the reformer had grown from an impetuous and impassioned enthusiast to a mature and careful shaper of ecclesiastical affairs, he soon gained a world-wide significance that has endured to the present day. This significance lay first of all in his shaping of a true evangelical church. Taking up the pattern of the New Testament and the early church, Calvin created in Geneva Ecclesiastical Ordinances which was to be normative for the reformed churches all over the world. He declared four offices as obligatory - that of pastors, that of doctors or preachers, that of presbyters or elders, and that of deacons or helpers. Pastors and doctors together formed the venerable Compagnie des Pasteurs for the regulation of teaching elders and pastors the "consistory" for the regulation of conduct. Presbyters and deacons together dealt with material concerns, care of the poor, and a part of the pastoral work.

**Pastors** - *chosen by ministers and magistrates with popular consent to be sought afterwards. The ministers were to give an oath of allegiance to the Ordinances and to the Magistrates. Pastors were to meet weekly to settle differences among themselves.*

**Doctors, Professors, Teachers** - *who were to teach sound doctrine and the languages of human sciences. They were subject to a similar discipline to that of the pastors. They were to meet quarterly, if necessary to settle disputes.*

**Elders** - *chosen by and from the city council. They were given the mandate to “oversee the life of everyone, admonish amicably those whom they saw to be erring or living a disordered life, and where it was required fraternal correction.” The clergy’s power within the city over the day-to-day matters of discipline was thus exercised through these lay elders. The elders had no power to restrain. They met once a week with the pastors to discuss offences and remedies. They also met once a month under the lay presidency of one of the four most senior magistrates, this emphasized that they had a secular as well as church function.*

**Deacons** - *had oversight of the poor relief, hospitals, social welfare, and were under the control of the pastors and elders.*

When to this organization was added the fixed order of service and liturgy including the singing of psalms and confession, a church would be built up that would be a community of believers, not only assembling on Sundays in divine service to thank God and to receive guidance for life, but also endeavouring to form the whole of existence into one great service of God. With the church as a centre, exerting an influence on lives that would include the service of God in everyday things, in education, in the school, in care for the poor, and in economic and political life, the entire private and public life was directed to God. Calvin organized the church as a community of believers actuated by the principle that every member according to his gifts and position should endeavour to make the world a theatrum gloriae Dei (a spectacle of God’s glory)

He also tried by the exercise of discipline, to make the church independent of the civil authorities, and thus he made it possible for a church to live in order, apart from and even against the will of civil authorities. The importance Calvin placed on discipline can be seen in this statement he made to the Council during the negotiations for his return.

*“If you desire to have me for your pastor, correct the disorder of your lives I consider the principle enemies of the gospel to be, not the pontiff of Rome nor heretics, or seducers, nor tyrants, but bad Christians. I dread abundantly more than those, carnal covetousness those debaucheries of the tavern, of the brothel and of gambling.”*

By following this course inexorably; and by violations of pure teaching and neglect and transgressions of church commandments with severe punishment, Calvin was involved in instant conflict in Geneva, until his followers gained the majority in the council in 1555. Best known are the actions against Sebastian Castellio, Ami Perrin, Berthelier, Bolsec, and Michael Servetus. It is not right, however, to charge all these to Calvin alone or to blame him on this account as an intolerant and intolerable dictator, a “proud ambitious tyrannic character,” as he has been called, “full of cruelty and hatred against his enemies.” Calvin never acted from personal motives, but always in agreement with the political authorities and in accordance with the ideas of the time. It was the end he had in view, his own deep sense of responsibility; the special political and religious conditions of Geneva, and the task that had to be performed there that compelled Calvin to secure in 1544 the honourable dismissal of Castellio from his position as school director because of divergent teaching in 1522 the banishment of Bolsec because of his attack on Calvin’s doctrine of election, and in 1553 the execution of the Spanish physician and pseudo-theologian Michael Servetus as a heretic and denier of the Trinity.

But as has been said Calvin never acted from personal motives but always in conjunction with the political authorities of the time to attain the discipline desired, and at this point it would be right to introduce that from the Ordinances previously mentioned stemmed the political authorities or the Consistory, a moral and religious judiciary to control church discipline.

It consisted of twelve pastors and twelve elders who were nominated by the pastors, subject to the city councils approval. The Consistory held no actual coercive power. Offenders could only be brought before it by an officer of the magistracy. Calvin wanted the Consistory to have the power to admonish and, where the sinner was unrepentant and his offences notorious, excommunicated. Without excommunication, Calvin argued, it was not possible to have proper Church discipline. He threatened to leave if his point was not met. The Council accepted the principle of excommunication, but would only finally invest the power to do so in itself, and not the Consistory. In practice the Geneva council added its decision to that of the consistory, and often overturned the Consistory’s judgement.

And so as we have seen and in Calvin’s view Geneva should, by an inward reinforcing, have become a bulwark of the Reformation, but the city was never an end in itself for the reformer. Until 1555, when the political climate had changed, aided by an influx of French refugees who were very pro-Calvin, the Reformer was consistently frustrated and harassed in his attempts to reform the city “according to the word of God.” In these years Geneva seemed endlessly rocked by heretical, political and personal opposition to Calvin from powerful families, individuals in the council, and even from among the pastors. He was sometimes spat on in the street, often ridiculed, and escaped at least one assassination attempt. His aim became rather to win back France for the Gospel, and beyond this the many other countries whose ecclesiastical and spiritual leaders were in touch with him - Scotland, England and the Netherlands, Poland and Transylvania, to mention the most important. Only by placing every single Christian in the community of the church by exercising strict doctrinal and ecclesiastical discipline could Calvin

succeed in accomplishing the work of the Reformation as the successor of Luther in western and central Europe.

*“Protestantism is indebted to him for what was maintained or won for the Reformation outside Germany and the Northern countries.”*  
(K. Holl)

How superior and large-hearted, how broad rather than narrow-minded Calvin really was is shown most clearly through efforts for the unity of the church. Calvin sought, whenever and wherever possible, the unification of all evangelicals.

The years 1555 to the death of the reformer saw the consolidation of his powerbase and work. Since his return in 1541, and in spite of the continued differences of excommunication, Calvin had put his legal expertise at the disposal of the council, and he was much used as they overhauled civil constitutions, statutes, and internal treaties, and the like. He thus was part of a process which saw Geneva emerge in 1558 as a city now fully equal and independent from its neighbouring “big brother”, Berne, and was thus granted citizenship of Geneva in 1556.

The next extract is from T.H.L. Parker’s book on John Calvin (pg 152-154). It is an in depth and touching record of the reformers last messages to his ministers and to his friend Farel, kind of a summary of his life from his point of view and a summary of all that has been said. It is written with the same passion as the Apostle Paul writes to Titus and Timothy and in many instances covers the same ground as Paul in his letters, and in my opinion it gives us a clear and unadulterated look into the mind and thinking of this truly great man. There was, of course, the good man, Maistre Guillaume, and then blind Courauld. And besides them there was Maistre Antoine Saunier and that fine preacher Froment, who had laid aside his apron and got up in the pulpit then went back to his shop, where he chattered, and thus gave a double sermon.

*I have lived here amid continual strife I have been saluted in derision of an evening before my door with forty or fifty arquebus shots. Just imagine howthat frightened a poor scholar timid as I am, and as I confess I have always been.*

*Then afterwards I was expelled from this city and went to Strasbourg and when I had lived there some time I was called back here. But I had no less trouble when I tried to do my duty than previously. They set the dogs at my heels, calling out ‘Wretch wretch!’ and they snapped at my gown and my legs.*

*I went to the Council of the Two Hundred when they were fighting and I kept back the others who wanted to go, and who had nothing to do there. They may boast that it was they who did everything like M. de Saulx (Nicolas des Gallars) who was there, and as I went in, they said to me. ‘Go away Monsieur, they have gainst you’. I replied ‘I will do no such thing. Come wicked men that you are, come and kill me. My blood will rise up against you and these very benches will require it.’ So I have been amid struggles. And you will find that there will be others, not less, but greater. For you are a perverse and*

*unhappy nation, and though there are good men in it the nation is perverse and wicked, and you will have troubles when God shall have called me away, for though I am nothing, yet I well know that I have prevented three thousand tumults that might have broken out in Geneva. But take courage and fortify yourselves, for God will make use of this church and will maintain it and assures you that he will protect it.*

*I have had many infirmities which you have been obliged to bear with, and what is more, all I have done has been worth nothing. The ungodly will greedily seize upon this word, but I sat it again that all I have done has been worth nothing and that I am a miserable creature. But certainly I can say this that I have willed what is good, that my vices have always displeased me, and that the root of the fear of God has been in my heart; and you may say that the disposition was good; and I pray you, that the evil be forgiven me, and if there was any good, that you conform yourselves to it and make it an example,*

*As to my doctrine I have taught faithfully, and God has given me grace to write what I have written as faithfully as it was in my power. I have not falsified a single passage of the Scriptures, nor given it a wrong interpretation to the best of my knowledge; and though I might have introduced subtle senses, had I studied simplicity; I have written noting out of hatred to any one, but I have always faithfully propounded what I esteemed to be for the glory of God*

*As to our internal state, you have elected Monsieur de Beze to hold my place. Take care to help him for the charge is great, and so weighty that he might well sink under the load. But take care to support him. I know that he has a good will and will do what he can. Let everyone consider the obligation which he has not only to the church but also to the City, which you have promised to serve in adversity as well as in prosperity. Let each keep to his vocation do not try to retire from it nor enter into factions. For when people go underground and intrigue, they may say indeed that they did not reflect, and that they did aim at this or that. But let them consider the responsibility that they have contracted before God. There will be bitterness in the heart, all that is good for nothing and is even contrary to a Christian disposition. You should guard against it, and live in good accord and all friendship and sincerity*

*I had forgotten this point. I pray you make no change, no innovation. People often ask for novelties. Not that I desire for my own sake out of ambition what I have established should remain, and that people should retain it without wishing for something better, but because all changes are dangerous and sometimes hurtful.*

*On my return from Strasbourg, I composed the Catechism - and in haste; for I would never accept the ministry until they had taken an oath on these two points, that is, to preserve the Catechism and discipline. And while I was writing it they came to fetch pieces of paper the size of my hand and carry them to the printers. Though Monsieur Pierre Viret was then in this town, do you think I ever showed*

*him a word of it? I never had the time. I have sometimes indeed thought of putting some finishing touches to it if I had had the leisure.*

*As at the Sunday prayers, I adopted the form of Strasbourg and borrowed the greater part from it. I could not take any of the other prayers from it, for it had none, but I took the whole from the Scriptures.*

*I also had to compose a formula of Baptism when I was at Strasbourg; here the children of the Anabaptists were brought to me from five or six leagues off to be baptized. I then composed this rough formula - which I would not advise you all the same to change.*

*The Church of Bern has betrayed this Church, and they have always feared me more than they loved me. I want them to know that I died in the opinion that they feared rather than loved me. And even now they fear me more than they love me, and have always been afraid lest I should upset their "Eucharist."*

He turned again to Farel with a touching letter:

*"Since it is God's will that you should outlive me, remember our friendship. It was useful to God's Church and its fruits await us in heaven. I do not want you to tire yourself on my account. I draw my breath with difficulty and expect each moment to breathe my last. It is enough that I live and die for Christ, who is all to all his followers a gain both in life and in death."*

(Thus Calvin's translation of Phil 1:21 in his Commentary: 'For Christ is gain to me in living and in dying.') Farel, however, went to see him for the last time; but after this he asked that the many visitors should pray for him rather than visit him. For another fortnight he lingered in distress and pain still trying to work, repeating verses from the psalms. He was, as had foretold, in command of his mind until the end. On 27 May the Register de Conseil recorded: 'Today about 8 o'clock in the evening, le sponsable Ian Calvin has gone to God whole and entire in sense and understanding, thanks be to God

At first his body lay in state, but so many came to see it that it was feared the Evangelicals would be accused of creating the cult of a new saint. He was therefore buried on Sunday 28 May in the common cemetery, without a tombstone, as he himself had wished. 'And there he lies today awaiting the resurrection which he had taught and which he had so firmly hoped.'

## WRITINGS AND DOCTRINES

*“As to my doctrine, I have taught faithfully, and God has given me grace to write what I have written as faithfully as it was in my power. I have not falsified a single passage of the Scriptures, nor given it a wrong interpretation to the best of my knowledge; and though I might have introduced subtle senses, had I studied simplicity. I have written nothing out of hatred to any one, but I have always faithfully propounded what I esteemed to be for the glory of God.”*

As Calvin himself said “I have taught faithfully” and this he did, but not only did Calvin preach, and teach children, adults, and students, but he also wrote extensively - expositions (exegeses) and homilies on almost all the books of the Old and New Testaments, theological tractates (for the most part pamphlets in defense of the Geneva Reformation or the Reformation as a whole),

And of course teaching and counseling letters. All his ideas were combined in the *Institutio Religionis Christianae*, which he revised several times until it finally filled four big volumes.

It is the most important doctrinal work of the Reformation period and it remains the example par excellence of reformed thinking. Beginning as no more than an introduction to and a presentation of the contents of Holy Scripture, all its Bible-centredness does not prevent it from standing also within the tradition of the church. It contains lively discussions of ancient philosophy the church fathers (especially Chrysostom and Augustine), the scholastics (Peter Lombard, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm of Canterbury, Duns Scotus, and Bernard of Clairvaux, the representative of the contemporary Roman Church, Erasmus, Luther, Bucer, Melancthon, the Anabaptists, the Spiritualists and the anti-Trinitarians. While Calvin in this way combined and

Systematized the entire theological thinking of his time, it must yet be said that he did not follow a particular theological principle. His theology cannot be explained from any one idea which is contained in it – not, for instance, from the idea of predestination but he simply puts together the Biblical truths and combines them by reference to the overruling principle of the decisive position of Christ.

Foremost in Calvin’s thought stands the famous introductory sentence of the *Institutio*, “*For our wisdom in so far as it really deserves the name wisdom and is sure and reliable, comprises basically two things – the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.*” The knowledge of oneself and the knowledge of God condition each other, but the knowledge of God must come first. Calvin thinks that this knowledge – the *semen religionis* – is planted as a seed in every man, even the heathen. It is not, however, sufficient, not because God is far from man, but because man is far from God. True knowledge of God is not therefore, possible from natural theology (i.e. nurtured by nature and history), but only at that place where God himself opens His mouth (i.e. from the revelation of God which is witnessed in the Bible of the Old and New Testaments). This Bible needs the confirmation neither of a mediate stage (the church or reason) nor verbal inspiration: it needs, however, the witness of the Holy Spirit – God alone is the adequate

witness of Himself. Only God can bring us to a true, unequivocal understanding the revelation. It is not easy to trace out all the consequences of this teaching. From it stems the great emancipation the whole power of inwardness in Protestantism. The binding to the sole authority of God liberates man from human authorities and roots him in eternity alone. This doctrine is at the same time the foundation of freedom of belief and conscience.

While Calvin in his doctrine of God (the doctrine of the Trinity, the distinction between the knowledge of God as the Creator and the knowledge of God as the Redeemer), and in his teaching about angels, the devil, and man, follows the traditional and usual Reformed position, the stress which he lays of the doctrine of predestination and especially the teaching of the law stands out. When in his teaching about Scripture he pointed out that the Old and New Testament, as promise as well as law, pointed to Christ, one of the most characteristic features of his theology became apparent – the unbreakable unity of the grace of God and the giving of the law. The Decalogue, as explained by the prophets and the commandments of Christ, is for Calvin not only a schoolmaster for fallen man, but also an element of the continuing Covenant of God. It is his benefaction. *“a norm of thinking and acting which is accepted voluntarily and in grateful obedience, the giving of direction for the earthly pilgrimage, which is necessary for sinners who have received grace”*. (P. Barth) This teaching has led to Calvin’s being charged with legalism but this charge like so many others is unfounded.

In Christology Calvin develops the doctrine of the early Church – the Calcedonian teaching of the two natures, the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* in the sense of the old church and high scholastic understanding. According to this doctrine the Son of God was in a mysterious way fully the man Jesus Christ but at the same time, as the Son of God was at the side of the Father; this is the so-called Extra Calvinisticum. Furthermore, Calvin emphasized the work of the Mediator Jesus Christ by combining previously existing elements into a new compound; he formed the doctrine of the threefold office of existing elements into a new compound; he formed the doctrine of the threefold officer of Christ (the prophetic, royal and priestly office). In regard to the saving work of Christ he generally follows the Apostolicum, but contrary to Luther for instance, he interprets the *Descensus ad inferos* as uttermost pain of soul.

The decisive factor in soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) is, of course, the Holy Spirit. The person and work of the Mediator Jesus Christ are available for man only by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit effects faith, grants knowledge of God, inspires the “yes” to God, trust and obedience. And above all effects the decisive fellowship with Christ. The Holy Spirit alone creates repentance, sanctification, and the truly Christian life, which has as its marks self denial. Prayer, and the contemplation of eternal life. Without going into details it must be pointed out inn this connection that for Calvin the idea of the glory of God played a pre-eminent role. The reality of re-birth and the Christian life becomes evident in the fact that God’s will becomes stronger and stronger and takes the place of all self-restraint, whether moderate or excessive, so that man

belongs less and less to himself and more and more to God. In a manner unequalled by any other reformer, Calvin emphasizes that the main point of Christian faith is not a theoretical knowledge of God, but unconditional obedience to the will of God, ethical deeds, discipline, and the fulfillment of duty. Especially important in this connection is Calvin's redirection of ethics from the individual to the social side. Nor so much by personal sanctification and asceticism, but by work and the moderate usage of the goods of this world, by devotion to one's neighbour, and by unceasing service for the community, is the Christian able "*to march onwards on the way of his calling,*" and to reshape this world.

Decisive for the entire soteriology of Calvin is still another point – all faith and all the energy of sanctification and hope have their presupposition, not in man's free choice but in an inconceivable but merciful divine election, which only reaches us when we believe in Christ. From the first edition of the *Institutio* Calvin saw the cardinal point of the Christian doctrine to be election in Christ, as for instance, in Ephesians 1 v. 4 "*even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him*"

Calvin from time to time unfortunately obscured the Biblical standpoint by metaphysical speculation in the direction of a double predestination (according to which some are predestined to eternal blessedness and others to eternal condemnation). By this of course, he became unfaithful to his own principle. Nevertheless, the aim of his doctrine of election is quite clear. The fact that man as a sinful disobedient creature is not condemned and thrown away before the majesty of God, but may reckon with an eternal salvation, cannot have its foundation in any human dignity or merit but only can be found in grace and in the miracle of the merciful love of God which revealed itself in Jesus Christ. "*The origin of election consists of this, that the pure goodness of God made salvation available to us*". (*Katechismus Genevensis*) By being thus brought into repentance, faith, sanctification, and hope, the Christian life does not have its foundation in any decision of the human will but in God's pure, electing love alone. Because God is eternal His electing decision is also eternal. Although Calvin was often guilty of carrying his doctrine too far, this doctrine when correctly understood had great positive consequences. It gave to the Calvinistic Reformation its tremendous drive, its exemplary spirit of resistance, and its fearlessness. If the French Huguenots, the armies of Oliver Cromwell, and the adherents of the Reformed faith in the midst of Catholic regions had also, besides their willingness to suffer, the courage to see all human dignities and majesties in their relativity before God to behave on their own side as free men who are independent of this work, and to fight and to die bravely for their belief, then the reason for this brave attitude is finally to be seen only in the consciousness of being chosen by God and being kept by God, whose power is greater and stronger than death and the devil.

Calvin also deals most extensively in the *Institutio* with the doctrine of the church. The church is not in itself an object of faith, but is the mother of believers and a means to the Christian community. As noted above, Calvin understands the church primarily from the view point of its officers to whom are given the "*power of the keys*" to the sermon and

the accompanying church discipline. Only by the Word and the rightly administered sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper (in the doctrine of the sacraments Calvin stands between an exaggerated view of the sacraments and the spiritualistic belittling) is the church a real congregation. As Calvin felt that these characteristic features were lacking in the Roman Catholic Church, he felt it was the false church.

In Calvin's view that state, the politica administratio, belongs also to the means of grace. It is not simply a consequence of sin but is a result of God's merciful command. Its function is the protection of law and order in the sense of the Ten Commandments. The Christian is required by Calvin to take part in the work of the state. He must be obedient to the authorities and perhaps under some circumstances even suffer injustice at the hands of an unjust authority. It is remarkable that Calvin grants to the lower orders of civil power the right to resist. From this a general right of resistance was derived in later Calvinism.

## **CONCLUSION**

It may be said that a large part of the thought which Calvin expressed in the Institution and the rest of his writings is still of great significance for theology and the church – in particular his doctrines of Testimonium Spiritus Sancti, the threefold office of Christ election, the glory of God and the form of the church.

Beyond this his thought influenced Western civilization to no small extent. He had no desire to be a pioneer of modern democracy, but it is his influence that is seen in the liberal-democratic rights of the individual, the right of resistance, and the economic development and social thinking of the West – not to speak of his influence upon individual thinkers and men of action from Oliver Cromwell to Woodrow Wilson and John Foster Dulles and from Immanuel Kant and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Alexandre Vinet, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Much in our culture is in the final analysis only a fruit of Calvin's thinking.

*“the heart of a Christian must lift itself above the seeking of its own blessedness.”*  
*John Calvin*