

“The Loved and Hated John Calvin” – Protestant Reformation Lecture #2

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Today, we look at a Reformer that came on the heels of Luther—the Frenchman John Calvin.

The year is 1562, and not surprisingly John Calvin is writing. This time about sorrows and death. John is only 53 years of age, but he has less than 2 years remaining before he dies from overwork, stress, and a lifetime of illness.

His beloved wife, Idelette (appropriately a name meaning “hard working”), passed away 13 years ago. They were married only 9 years. At her passing, John the loving husband wrote, “The reason for my sorrow is not an ordinary one. I am deprived of my excellent life companion, who, if misfortune had come would have been my willing companion not only in exile and sorrow [which they were], but even in death.” Added to the loss of Idelette, was the fact that Idelette was never able to bring a child out of infancy. The only child that made it to birth was John’s son Jacques born in 1542, only to die 2 weeks later.

The reason Calvin is writing about his sorrows and childlessness now, 20 years after Jacques’ death in 1562, is because another French writer François Baudouin has recently published a series of controversial attacks on John Calvin and Protestantism. Baudouin has gone as far to say that Calvin’s childlessness is God’s curse on him for his writings and ministry. Calvin’s reply gets at the heart of the title of today’s lecture. Calvin writes:

“God had given me a son. God hath taken my little boy. This he [François Baudouin] reckons among my misdeeds, that I would have no children. [And yet] I have myriads of sons throughout the Christian world.” (*Responsio ad Balduini convicia*)

Calvin saw, before his death, what we know today. Calvin was accused of many misdeeds by some, and yet he was a dear father of the faith to many others. Hence, my lecture’s title: “The Loved and Hated John Calvin.”

John Calvin was born on the 10th of July, 1509. Calvin’s father, Girard, was a dutiful Catholic who had procured his son at the age of 12 an ecclesiastical beneficence. An ecclesiastical beneficence was a monetary gift from the church. It was supposed to be given to priests and bishops who led parishes, served the mass, and cared for souls, but a controversial practice had developed where boys like John Calvin received money from the Catholic Church without doing much or anything at all. Bruce Gordon, the Yale University biographer of Calvin explains, “It was a straightforward arrangement whereby Calvin received income from the church...without the inconvenience of having to perform any religious duty...the revenues of the church had long been in the clutches of families eager to expand their patronage networks.” Calvin, to his credit, at least looked after the altars in the nearby cathedral.

The church money served more as an investment in a gifted and precocious student. By 1523, at the age of 14, Calvin left his home of Noyon and traveled 70 miles southwest to Paris. There Calvin began studies as a priest. Calvin moved on to the more prestigious Paris’ college de Montargui one year

later where he received formal Catholic theological training as well as instruction in grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, and astronomy. In the classroom, Calvin tasted the best of medieval Catholic Scholasticism. Such teaching involved a series of questions, arguments, and counter-points to the nth degree. Calvin called Catholic Scholasticism *sophistry* later in life, a word that suggests his education was full of misleading arguments, with the intention to deceive. **The biggest problem with Catholic Scholasticism is it had made Christian doctrine a mystical science way beyond the use of everyday man. The things of God were made obscure, ambiguous, and impractical for real living.**

Two providential events removed Calvin from the influence of Catholic Scholasticism and toward Protestantism. The first, was his father Girard had a falling out with the Bishop of Noyon. As a result, Calvin's money and church backing were gone. Without this money, Calvin's father demanded Calvin give up the church and turn to a more profitable career in law. So, in 1528, moved out of Paris to study law for 3 years. These 3 years of study would come in handy 10 years later when helping with the governance of the city of Geneva, Switzerland.

The second providential event was Girard's death just 3 years later in 1531. Incidentally, Girard Calvin died outside of the good graces and sacraments of the church (only after his death was he granted absolution). At this point Calvin was 22, and without a controlling patriarch calling the shots, Calvin went back to Paris to take up his true love: Classic Literature. Then, in 1532, Calvin wrote his first book on the 1st century writer Seneca. The book displayed Calvin's ability in ancient languages as well as his insights into government and law. Long after Calvin's death, this book was labeled "a masterpiece of erudition" (T. George), but unfortunately, for Calvin at the time it was a financial flop.

Calvin's conversion was a slow process building between 1527 and 1533. Like Martin Luther, Calvin was a convinced and dutiful Catholic for many decades; no single sermon, writing, or idea was going to be enough to bring a person to a quick conversion. Calvin explains, "So obstinately addicted to the superstitions of the papacy did I remain that it would have been hard indeed to have pulled me out of so deep a quagmire." Calvin dates his own conversion to 1533 and describes it this way:

God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early of period of life. Having thus received some taste and knowledge of true godliness I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardor.

It's worth asking the question, so where did Calvin receive this "taste and knowledge of true godliness," a reference to the teachings of Reformed Protestantism. Though there are dozens and dozens of French Christians who followed on the heels of Germany's Luther, the most noted early French Evangelical was a theology professor named Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples. Even before Luther was being read in France, Lefèvre was a respected scholar focusing on the New Testament itself. Rather than swallowing the writings of medieval Catholics, Lefèvre began as early as 1507 translating the Psalms into French. And before Luther had nailed the *95 Theses* on Wittenberg's door, Lefèvre had written a commentary on Paul's epistles that called for a the development of a personal trust in God and a vibrant

spirituality. Lefevre's writings were a pure spring of life for those in France and beyond (both Martin Luther and Switzerland's Huldrych Zwingli spent time meditating on Lefèvre's writings on Paul). In 1523, after Luther's writings had radiated out across Europe, French Catholics condemned Lefèvre and his writings as heretical and dangerous. But by then the French Reform movement was underway eventually reaching the heart and life of Calvin.

A major turning point in Paris occurred in 1533 (on the 16th anniversary of Luther's posting of the *95 Theses*). A French evangelical by the name of Nicholas Cop preached a sermon with just enough Lutheran and Protestant thought, that **the Catholic powers responded with persecution**. Cop had to flee for his life. Calvin and others were implicated as evangelicals. For over a year, Calvin fled east to Angouleme where he did some preaching and writing, but as Catholic persecution against evangelicals increased, it was not safe to be a professing evangelical anywhere in France. The Frenchmen would hardly touch French soil ever again. Like Cop, Calvin ended up in Basel, Switzerland. This was one of the few Reformed cities in the French-speaking world. Basel was led by a respected theologian in his own right, Johannes Oecolampadius, and where Erasmus lived his last days.

Calvin's 1.5-2 years in Basel would be insignificant history, except for the fact, this is where he finished his first edition of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (usually shorted to *The Institutes* when discussed today).

It's at this point, I'd like to move to the major arguments on why Calvin has gone down in history as both loved and hated. Three interconnected reasons exist for Calvin's mixed reputation. These reasons are 1) Calvin the theologian; 2) Calvin the churchman, and 3) Calvin the statesman. We'll need to leave our efforts at chronological reflection and move more to these three themes that brought about such love and hatred.

First, Calvin is both loved and hated for his theology. The love for Calvin began with his writing of *The Institutes* in 1536. This first edition was a slim volume of only 6 chapters (his fifth and final edition in 1559 was 79 chapters). Calvin explained that its small size was perfect to hide beneath one's cloak or secretly stash among a traveling merchant's wares in order to avoid trouble. Calvin wrote *The Institutes* as a deferential letter to the King of France explaining that the French Evangelicals were godly saints and good citizens. The Institutes outlined the beliefs of the French Protestants in a logical way for the average reader. The first edition showed that it was the Protestants and not the Catholics who rightly interpreted and applied the Ten Commandments, Apostle's Creed, Prayer, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and even showed Protestantism to be proponents of good government.

Don't think this was some boring, lifeless tract about doctrine. It was filled with a passion, beauty, and a persevering faith that continues to bless its readers today. The opening lines of the main text say this: "Nearly the whole of sacred doctrine consists in these two parts: knowledge of God and of ourselves." From there, Calvin paints a picture of the glory of God and the Christian's commitment to pursue God's glory with delight and joy. Calvin's over-riding passion to see people gladly glorify God shows up in passages like this: "There is not one blade of grass, there is no color in this world that is not intended to make us rejoice."

There are also sections that call for courage among Protestants to stand strong against Catholic opposition. Calvin penned, "Now, then, let our adversaries throw at us as many examples as they wish, both of past and present ages. If we hallow the Lord of Hosts, we shall not be greatly afraid. Even though many ages may have agreed in like impiety, the Lord is strong to wreak vengeance, even to the third and fourth generation. Even though the whole world may conspire in the same wickedness, he has taught us by experience what is the end of those who sin with the multitude."

Calvin would go on as a theologian to write a verse-by-verse commentary on nearly every book in the Bible. He wrote treatise after treatise on nearly every major theological controversy of his day. Even one of his critics of a later century, Jacob Arminius would go on to say that next to the Bible, Calvin's commentaries were the best source for true knowledge of God. And still today, many have personally benefited from reading Calvin's commentaries and the final edition of *The Institutes*. Calvin, the theologian, is much loved.

But this love is in no way universal. In his own day, the Lutherans opposed his views on the Lord's Supper. Catholics deemed him a heretic. More so than any other topic, Calvin's high view of divine predestination has had detractors then and now. The critics accused Calvin as making God the author of evil. Others conclude that Calvin holds to fatalism and an automated universe. Admittedly, Calvin did believe nothing happened in the universe apart from God's decree. Calvin writes, "with his wisdom...from the farthest limit of eternity decreed what he was going to do, and now by his might carries out what he has decreed." Elsewhere, he concludes, "It is certain that not one drop of rain falls without God's sure command." Clearly, Calvin leaves no room for chance in God's ordering of the universe. He affirms the truth of Proverbs 16:33 without a hint of doubt: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD."

It should be noted that Calvin went to great pains in his own day to argue strongly against fatalism. Believing that God's perfect plan will be accomplished is not the same as saying God affirms or advocates for evil agents to do their activities. Calvin writes, "While God accomplishes through the wicked what he has decreed by his secret judgment, they are not excusable, as if they obeyed his precept..." In other words, God does not command evil or prescribe evil, but Satan acts, in Calvin's words, "in accordance with his character" and thus Satan brings about evil through his own will. For Calvin, God's will was greater and purer than Satan's will. God only allows evil to occur when His great will (what Calvin calls "secret will") for His glory and our good will ultimately prevail.

How this all works, for Calvin, is a profound mystery. He says we cannot understand how a good, beautiful, and majestic God is willing to work through wicked beings to accomplish good ends. Timothy George, a modern Calvinist, summarizes Calvin on this issue: "The problem of evil is so acute precisely because we cannot understand how the tragedies of life redound to the greater glory of God." George concludes, "True piety will realize that behind the suffering we experience, which in itself is not good but evil, God remains in His justice, wisdom and love, the Father who has promised never to leave us nor forsake us."

That is Calvin the loved and hated theologian; let's now turn to Calvin, the churchman. Calvin the churchman began in an unlikely way. In 1536, Calvin had snuck back into France in order to connect with his brother and half-sister and their families. Together, they were traveling to Strasbourg, an independent Reformed city on the border of France and Switzerland. Unfortunately, an armed conflict between Francis I and Emperor Charles V caused the traveling party to take a southern detour into Geneva, Switzerland. Geneva had declared itself to "live henceforth according to the gospel and the Word of God, and to abolish all papal abuses" a few months earlier on May 25. When news of Calvin's arrival reached the ears of another Frenchman in Exile, Guillaume Farel, ran to Calvin and begged him to stay. Farel desired Geneva to become a faithful city, in accordance with the picture described in Calvin's recently published *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

John Calvin was shy by temperament. Unlike Luther who loved a good fight and a rowdy party, John was a retiring scholar who preferred books to people. Calvin's whole purpose on this trip was to arrive in Strasbourg, settle, take up life as a scholar in residence, and fuel the Reformed fires through quiet writing and reflection. Calvin even spoke to Farel of his ill health and weak constitution as a motivating reason for life as a scholar. Farel would have none of it. In Old Testament prophetic passion, Farel fixed his eyes on John, laid hands on his head, and spoke with thunderous solemnity: "May God curse you and your studies if you do not join me here in the work He has called you to!" The 27-year old Calvin tremored, became speechless, and then consented with "I will remain in Geneva, – I give myself up to the Lord's good pleasure."

This was no small task. Calvin was a Frenchman in exile serving native Genevans, many of whom could care less whether their city was Catholic or Reformed. Geneva was a proud and headstrong city, and just after 3 years of Reforming efforts, both Calvin and Farel were dismissed from Geneva and told to get out of town just after the Easter service in 1538.

John Calvin now made it to his original destination: Strasbourg, a city led by a gifted leader named Martin Bucer who put Calvin to work. John flourished there for 3 years as a pastor. He translated some Psalms into French meter for congregational singing. He began lecturing in the local university, preached four sermons a week, rewrote an entire 2nd edition of *The Institutes*, wrote a few Protestant defenses against Catholic agitators, finished an entire commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, and attempted to unite Lutherans and other Reformed movements under a common understanding of the Lord's Supper. Not a bad three years, huh?

Should we add that this was also when his marriage to Idelette began? Calvin does not come across as the greatest romantic. When friendly matchmakers asked Calvin what he wanted in a woman, he responded honestly, "The only beauty which allures me is this – that she be chaste, not too nice or fastidious, economical, patient, likely to take care of my health." Despite this less than amazing request, he did marry the beautiful widow, Idelette, whom he came to love dearly. He also accepted the two children from her previous marriage as his own and took care of them after Idelette's death.

About this time, a Catholic writer by the name of Sadolet had written to the city of Geneva, attempting to lure them back to Catholicism. John Calvin back in Strasbourg would have none of it, and

sat down in 6 short days to write a response to Sadolet. One of the most stinging lines in that work is this:

“You . . . touch upon justification by faith, the first and keenest subject of controversy between us. . . . Wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, *the glory of Christ is extinguished.*”

Calvin shows his hand in two ways. First, Calvin is firmly in the Protestant camp; justification by faith is the first and keenest subject. This is the chief article of Biblical Christianity. But second, Calvin’s unique passion for the glory of God reigns supreme. This is Reformed Theology at its best: a passion for the supremacy of God in all things. Catholicism must not be tolerated because it, I quote for T.H.L. Parker’s biography on Calvin, "destroyed the glory of Christ in many ways — by calling upon the saints to intercede, when Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and man; by adoring the Blessed Virgin, when Christ alone shall be adored; by offering a continual sacrifice in the Mass, when the sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross is complete and sufficient."

Maybe if Calvin would have been less productive in Strasbourg, he wouldn’t have caught the Genevans’ attention again. They begged Calvin to return in 1541, and miracle of miracles, Calvin returned. When asked why, Calvin simply said, “Yet because I know that I am not my own master, I offer my heart as a true sacrifice to the Lord." Upon arriving, Calvin did not rebuke them or shame them. He simply retook his pulpit and preached the very next text in the very same book that he had been preaching when they had asked him to leave.

About a year later on July 28th Jacques was born and lived 2 short weeks. When writing a friend of Jacques’ passing, the somber Calvin penned, "The Lord has certainly inflicted a severe and bitter wound in the death of our baby son. But He is Himself a Father and knows best what is good for his children."

Calvin’s next 23 years in Geneva were long and hard. I would like to tell you that Calvin’s initial charitable action was the norm, but in reality, Calvin could be fierce and domineering in his return. Bruce Gordon summarizes this streak of pastoral revenge: “Over the next ten years he ruthlessly prosecuted the incompetent and obstinate, who were not allowed to impede the progress of reform...he neither forgave nor forgot those he held responsible for the humiliation of 1538.”

Under Calvin, Geneva enacted city wide laws, church-based institutions, and congregationally-minded discipline. If they wanted to be a city under the word of God and the gospel, Calvin was going to give everything he had to ensure this happened. His 1541 *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* were the blueprint of this vision. This included things like laws against working on the Sabbath, payment from the city for pastors, the establishment of theological schools, and a group called the consistory that monitored the morality of local citizens who for all practical purposes were all treated as members of the Church. The consistory fined violators, made decisions on whether a person could take the Lord’s supper or not, and made final decisions related to heresy and excommunication.

One reason Calvin has been loved as a churchman is the thoroughness he developed to instill the gospel into all facets of life. The Scottish Reformer John Knox learned and applied these ideas

decades later in Scotland. Calvin's heir apparent, Theodore Beza, would carry Calvin's views back into France when the Catholic/Protestant conflicts of the 16th century seemed to die down. The Netherlands and later American Colonies all took a page out of Calvin's book.

Not surprisingly, such thorough reforms have also been the scourge of Calvin's legacy. These reforms would lead to some embarrassing episodes of church discipline. On more than one occasion, Genevan citizens would gather as a mob outside his house threatening to throw him in the river, all while firing their muskets. In addition, these laws brought a heretic named Michael Servetus to his execution, as well as several dozen more guilty of witchcraft. Yes, the micromanaging and monstrous Calvin of history is all because an unwilling-at-first-Calvin did what the Genevans had asked him to do. Nonetheless, there is good reason that Protestants have since learned the value of a separation between church and state.

From theologian to churchman and now finally, the loved and hated statesman. Like Luther, Calvin was an international hero of Protestantism. As such, he wrote thousands of letters throughout his lifetime to encourage fellow workers of the Gospel. More than any other of his contemporaries, John Calvin attempted to unify Protestantism across Europe. He pled with fellow Reformers, "Amongst all the greatest evils of our century must be counted the first that the churches are so divided one from another and that there is scarcely even a relationship with us." Especially in the 1530s and 1540s, Protestants were hopeful of a Gospel Reform within the Catholic Church, but two things derailed these hopes in the middle of the 16th century: First, that the Catholic Church responded with the Council of Trent that affirmed absolutely every Catholic practice the Reformers hoped to overthrow; and second, the Protestant Churches remained divided on issues of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Church governance.

Even as the splintering continued, Calvin remained loyal to the international cause of Christ. He was a life-long correspondent of Philip Melancthon in Germany. He wrote to the Protestants in France, men like Thomas Cranmer in England, and Reformers at work in Italy. Admittedly, Calvin was sometimes his own worst enemy. His impassioned pleas to fellow Reformers came across as demanding and authoritarian and thereby lost their hopeful impact.

In time, Geneva became haven for many Reformed people of many different ethnicities and languages. John Knox of Scotland and his kinsmen worshiped for a while in Geneva as refugees, as well as the English who fled under the reign of bloody Mary, refugees from Italy, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Swiss lands all showed up to find solace in Calvin's city. Calvin stood in solidarity with those who gave their lives and livelihoods for Jesus Christ.

It is important to remember that there were more martyrs during the Reformation than all the persecutions of the early church combined. This was true in his native land of France, Calvin's beloved homeland. Calvin remained dedicated to the ongoing Protestant efforts. He wrote regularly to the King's sister Marguerite of Navarre. Though Calvin remained influential in France, over time his strong opinions wore thin. For instance, Calvin called many of the French Protestants Nicodemites, referring to the late night visitor of Jesus recorded in John 3. Calvin was not kind to secret Protestant disciples. He believed

they should profess Christ openly choosing either death or fleeing to exile like himself. He cheered one such Frenchmen facing death for his faith with the stirring words, "It remains for you to offer to him [God] this complete sacrifice, since it has pleased him to consecrate you to his service." To Calvin's horror, this particular Frenchmen recanted to save his life.

But there were hundreds others who lost their life, particularly in Paris. In 1559, dozens were executed with their tongues already cut from their mouths so they could not make any Protestant profession of faith at their death. In the midst of this chaos, Calvin wrote letter after letter to leaders like Theodore Beza, royalty like Marguerite of Navarre, and others with specific instructions on how Reform should be brought to France. Calvin's overbearing nature can be seen in these letters. One interesting development in his international statesmanship is when John Knox, one of Calvin's pupils, returned to Scotland. Knox foolishly had written words against the idea of a female leader in government, so when Elizabeth I took the throne, and hopes for Reformed Protestantism looked better than ever, Elizabeth, blamed Geneva and John Calvin as the ultimate source of Knox's views on women in leadership.

Love and hatred for Calvin continues. It is not surprising. The man wrote about everything and gave his opinion on everything. His beliefs were held strongly, argued intelligently, and thereby leaving little room for other opinions. In the centuries that followed, it was Reformed Calvinism that impacted more lands than Lutheranism. It was Reformed Calvinism that traveled on the Mayflower and found its home in some of America's earliest settlements. It was Reformed Calvinism that ushered in the First Great Awakening, built the foundations of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. It was Reformed Calvinism that came from the lips and writings of Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and of more recent vintage John Piper and Tim Keller. Calvin continues to be loved.

But then there are those who rejected Calvinism, most of Catholic France, the next generation of reformers like Jacob Arminius, the great Wesley brothers and their Methodist Revivals, and later in the writings of George MacDonald and modern theologians like Scott McKnight and Roger Olson. Over the past century, Warren Wiesbe, AW Tozer, and Chuck Smith and the Calvary Chapel movement have all avoided the Calvinist stream.

Calvin was one-part theologian, one-part churchman, and one-part statesman. If we wanted, we could add a 4th quality...John Calvin was one-part Ironman. Despite a lifetime of stomach woes, migraines, and later ailments of gout and hemorrhoids, Calvin's pace never slackened. A Genevan named Colladon recorded Calvin's regular schedule this way:

Calvin for his part did not spare himself at all, working far beyond what his power and regard for his health could stand. He preached commonly every day for one week in two [and twice on every Sunday, or a total of about 10 times every fortnight]. Every week he lectured three times in theology. . . . He was at the Consistoire on the appointed day and made all the remonstrances. . . . Every Friday at the Bible Study . . . what he added after the leader had made his declaration was almost a lecture. He never failed in visiting the sick, in private warning and counsel, and the rest of the numberless matters arising out of the ordinary exercise of his ministry. But besides these ordinary tasks, he had great care for believers in France, both in

teaching them and exhorting and counseling them and consoling them by letters when they were being persecuted, and also in interceding for them. . . . Yet all that did not prevent him from going on working at his special study and composing many splendid and very useful books.

John Calvin loved God's glory and sought to promote God's glory throughout the known world. He wielded his great gifts and sought great good. Not perfect, but faithful. I close with his own words, maybe not the most self-aware thing John ever wrote, but still worthy to emulate..."I have written nothing out of hatred to anyone, but I have always faithfully propounded what I esteemed to be *for the glory of God.*"