

# John Calvin's Importance and Criticisms as a Reformer

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## Introduction

Martin Luther has been historically recognised as a prominent instigator of the Protestant Reformation, but John Calvin may be described as the architect of the Reformed Faith. This essay will assess Calvin's importance as a Reformer and why he attracted criticism during his lifetime. It will do this by examining some of his contributions which standardised *Reformed Theology* (especially the *Geneva Bible*, his *Institutes of Christian Religion*, and *Commentaries*). Features of his ministry including debates, sermons, lectures, church government and worship liturgy will follow. The importance of Calvin is further demonstrated in his legacy, which was a restored Biblical perspective to enhance Protestant work ethics, education, jurisprudence and ethical economics, all of which were refined from Luther and others. The penultimate section encompasses international influences, with a summation of his theological influence on the world. Finally, at the expense of brevity, a familiar criticism of Calvin is addressed, namely the *Servetus Heresy*.

## Theological Standards

### **Geneva New Testament (1557) and Geneva Bible (1560)**

The *Geneva Bible* (and associated publications) were powerful instruments in the hands of God to equip the saints of the Reformation. Although Calvin was not exclusively involved in the direct development of the Geneva translations, according to God's providence he was instrumental in many aspects of its production. The theological and socio-political environment of Geneva in the Reformation culminated in a range of factors that enhanced its publishing and distribution. The calibre of persecuted theologians seeking refuge attracted to the religious character of Geneva (affected by Calvin and others), coupled with the abundance of printers attracted by the prolific works of Calvin and his ilk enabled mass production and global dissemination of Reformed literature<sup>1</sup>. Not just advising aspects of this translation, Calvin's sermons and treatises were incorporated as unique and valuable footnotes regarding cross references (pertaining to Stephanus' chapters and verses) and marginal commentary.<sup>2</sup> Readily available and with devotional aids, it became one of the driving factors of the Reformation, as a means of grace to common people, as well as a fore-runner to the *Authorised Version* (commissioned to prevent the *Geneva Bible* 'removing' the English Monarchy).

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A. (Ed.). (2016). *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 617.

<sup>2</sup> Berry, L. E., & Whittingham, W. (2011). *The Geneva Bible: a Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*. Hendrickson Publishers. 1-24.

Brake, D. L. (2008). *A Visual History of the English Bible: the Tumultuous Tale of the World's Bestselling Book*. Baker Books. 143-160.

Mangalwadi, Vishal. (2011). *The Book that Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*. Thomas Nelson. 154-156.

## ***Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536)***

The greatest document of the Reformation (even above Luther's *Bondage of the Will*) has been claimed by many theologians as Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.<sup>3</sup> In 1536, it was his first edition of systematic theology based on the structure of the *Apostle's Creed*. Published at 27 years age, only three years after his conversion (based on traditional dates), it anonymously demonstrated a remarkable and masterful comprehension of Scripture. By his fifth edition (1559), it grew to 450000 words with 3000 Biblical references.

This is important for the Reformation as it formed the seminal work for all future Protestant systematic theology in the Reformed Creeds and Confessions. These include the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), the *Belgic Confession* (1618-1619), the *Canons of Dort* (1618-1619), and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647). There are numerous other Confessions and Catechisms, all slight variants of same fundamental source (the pattern of the *Institutes*)<sup>4</sup>. In the modern Reformed church, these *Institutes* remain an important reference and devotional device, yet subordinate to the *Supreme Standard*.

## ***Bible Commentaries***

Calvin's Bible commentary project was the largest undertaken by one individual! 45 volumes of more than 400 pages each, he covered 24 of 39 Old Testament books and all the New Testament except 2 & 3 John and Revelation. Examining 75% of the Bible, it remains extremely expositional, exegetical, pastoral and scholastic. Even Arminius held Calvin's commentaries in high esteem, recommending them to be studied by his students as "he excels beyond comparison in the interpretation of Scripture"<sup>5</sup>. They are still in print and extensively used by many, especially in the Reformed and Presbyterian church.

## **Pulpit and Oratory**

### **Lausanne Disputation (1536)**

While in Lausanne, the council was deciding Romanism or Protestantism in a public debate. The Roman theologians were generally superior in scholarship, brilliant academically and excellent orators. After a day of discussions, the Reformers had a lesser preference by the attendees. Near the conclusion, Calvin asked some penetrating questions which the Romans inadequately answered. Calvin proceeded to speak impromptu for about one hour, unaided by notes, quoting extensive Scripture, Early Church Fathers and

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, J. (1981). *The Best of John Calvin* (S. Dunn, Ed.). Baker Book House. 27.

Calvin, J. (2014). *Institutes of the Christian religion* (R. White, Ed.). The Banner Of Truth Trust. 42-43.

<sup>4</sup> Beeke, J. R., Barrett, M. P. V., Bilkes, G. M., & Smalley, P. M. (Eds.). (2014). *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*. Reformation Heritage Books. 1971-2091.

<sup>5</sup> Philip Schaff: *Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical notes*. Volume I. The History of Creeds. - Christian Classics Ethereal Library. (n.d.). ccel.Org; Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds1/creeds1.iv.iii.html>

more recent theologians prolifically<sup>6</sup>. This silenced the entire clergy and public audience. Franciscan friar, Jean Tandy (one of the eminent scholars and antagonist preachers) arose and immediately endorsed God's truth as presented by Calvin, repented to God, apologised to Lausanne, resigned from the Roman church and professed a Reformed faith from that moment!<sup>7</sup>

## Preaching Ministry

Calvin was a prolific preacher with an estimated 4000 sermons. In Geneva, he initially preached five times per week. When an increased number of pilgrims (seeking Calvin's messages), Council insisted he increase to twice daily on alternate weeks! Most of these were recorded by amanuenses, however, currently only 1500 sermons remain available (due to past careless conservation).

Some of the 4000 "letters", tracts, treatises, confessions, and lectures became footnotes for the *Geneva Bible* recorded by his adherents, as mentioned earlier.

## Reformed Worship

The Reformed Church, as modified by Calvin, saw a radical change in doctrine and practice from the Roman Church. Like all the Reformers, *Sola Scriptura* was paramount. Calvin revisited and expanded the *munus triplex* (three-fold office of Christ as *Prophet, Priest and King*) and Pneumatology (particularly the Holy Spirit's person and work).

The Lord's Supper was taken regularly and regulated only to the true repentant believers. Reformed worship denies *transsubstantiation* (Roman) and *consubstantiation* (Lutheran), and had a moderate view compared to Zwingli's understanding of the Lord's Supper. Another difference from Lutheranism is the unequivocal stance of the *Regulative Principle* in worship and life.

Calvin also advocated congregational singing in his liturgy quite early (after Bucer's example), producing many metrical Psalms, *Nunc Dimittis*, Decalogue, and Apostle's Creed. The liturgy developed by Calvin (especially *Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers* 1545-1566) immediately influenced French, English, Scottish, German and Dutch churches.<sup>8</sup>

Church architecture was dramatically changed, with stained-glass windows of Biblical images removed, Biblical murals and interiors painted white, and statues (especially crucifixes and Mary) destroyed. Open Bibles replaced altars, and pulpits were centralised to emphasise the supreme authority of God's Word.

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<sup>6</sup> de Boer, Erik. (2009). *Calvin's step into public at the Disputation of Lausanne* (October 1536). Tydskrift vir Geesteswetenskappe. 49. 453-466. [English Translated (Google)]

<sup>7</sup> D'aubigné, M. (2000). *History of the reformation in Europe in the time of Calvin*. Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications. 156.

<sup>8</sup> Gibson, J., & Earngey, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Reformation Worship : Liturgies from the Past for the Present*. New Growth Press. 302-303.

## **Christian Worldview**

As a consequence of Luther, and later embellished by Calvin, the Reformed worldview ensured believers lived in a practical life-changing way. According to Calvin, theology applied to all aspects of life, as Reformed and Puritans lived in the emphatic *Coram Deo*, especially directed by *Soli Deo gloria*, with a clear perspective of the original Edenic principles and value as the *imago Dei* (Rom. 11:36, 1 Cor. 10:31).

## **Protestant Work Ethic**

Calvin (and others) restored the concept that all work is a calling from God, not just for the clergy (Dt.10:12). Man now ennobled and elevated all work to that calling. Dignity and worth in service and employment lead to dynamic industry and energy for the Lord! An example is Calvin's address to the Swiss watchmakers (who retain the highest reputation in modern craftsmanship), he claimed they would give an account on the Judgement Day, where all their watches would be presented as the excellence of workmanship to the glory of God.

## **Education**

Calvin promoted education to enable people to love God with all one's mind (Matt.22:37), not just for elitist aristocrats or monasteries. All people should be able to read the Bible for themselves. This directed him to expand his lectures from his university tenures, to form the Geneva Academy (1559), a public college and seminary of 600 students. By 1564, the college had 1200 public and 300 seminary students. Many of the Reformation leaders (including 4000 missionaries) trained there. It is important to recognise the impact on the Reformation by these students. It was referred to as the *School of Death* as it trained missionaries to evangelise France, under the peril of martyrdom. Many (most?) European Reformers studied (or emulated) and incorporated the lessons from Geneva. Thomas Jefferson (a deist) recognised the moral and scholastic value of the academy and even tried to buy and move it to USA<sup>9</sup>!

## **Jurisprudence**

Calvin promoted the Decalogue (and associated Scriptural laws) for moral foundation of Genevan society. Adhering to God's laws, glorifies God by his Character and is profitable for redemption, salvation and His honour. It provided a clear definition of legal behaviour, appropriate punishment to the crime (Ex.21:24), and recompense/restitution. It was a legal code based not on natural law, but Biblical law.

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<sup>9</sup> Shawen, N. M. (1984). Thomas Jefferson and a "National" University: The Hidden Agenda for Virginia. *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 92(3), 309–335. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4248729>

## **Ethical Capitalism** (including Productivity and Free Market Enterprise)

Calvin's economic directives to glorify God embraced Biblical teachings of hard work, right of private ownership, investment of private capital and resources, the blessings from God for one's labour, vocational call in business, ethical business behaviour, risk management (by trusting God's providence), nobility of profit, and necessity of charity and social welfare from personal wealth. Protestant theology promulgated economies diametric to the Roman church's presence, which created poverty and reduced productivity.

## **International Influence**

As mentioned earlier, Calvin (plus others) trained and equipped with resources Huguenots from France, and English and Scots who escaped *Bloody Mary* (Mary [Tudor] I of England). Stewards to the mysteries of God, they returned to evangelise their own countries despite potential martyrdom. Imbued with a dynamic attitude to life, crowned with sense of calling and empowerment, they were Biblically literate, bold and proactive.

In inquisitorial France (1562), thousands of Reformed churches were established to nurture ten percent of the population. One third of the nobles became open confessors of the Reformed faith despite the fear of persecution. Scotland under John Knox, experienced the complete rebuilding of the Church based on the formats of Calvin. The likes of Andrew Melville, Samuel Rutherford (whose tome, *Lex, Rex*, promoted Calvinistic political government) and the *Covenanters* revolutionised that nation and the future of nations such as Africa, Australia and New Zealand<sup>10</sup>. Previously, in Holland, the *Belgic Confession* and *Synod of Dort* were addressing theology and confronting *Arminianism*. This is predominantly where the Calvin's *Institutes* were presented in the *Doctrines of Grace* (often summarised as the *Five Points of Calvinism*<sup>11</sup>).

England was influenced by Thomas Cramner and Edward VI reverted the nation to Protestantism. Trials and tribulations of Protestantism providentially lead to Calvinists (mostly) to become *Puritans*<sup>12</sup> and in time assembly of *Westminster Divines* produced the *Confession of Faith* and several other Presbyterian works.

## **Dr Michael Servetus**

Michael Servetus was a Renaissance scholar in the court of Charles V. In his youth he attacked the opulence of the Papacy (Medici popes) and published *On the Errors of the Trinity* (1531) which demonstrated Arian unitarianism. Assuming Calvin would be an advocate for his ideas, he corresponded

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<sup>10</sup> Stringer, C. (2004). *Discovering Australia's Christian Heritage : "La Australia del Espritu Santo", South land of the Holy Spirit* (Revised and Expanded). Col Stringer Ministries. 27-29.

<sup>11</sup> Total Depravity/Inability, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement/Particular Redemption, Irresistable Calling/Grace, Perseverance/Preservation of the Saints.

<sup>12</sup> Beeke, J. R., & Jones, M. (2012). *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*. Reformation Heritage Books. 1-7.

with Calvin cordially for three years, after which Servetus' sarcasm and derision escalated<sup>13</sup>.

Servetus published an attack on the Trinity and slandered Calvin in *The Restoration of Christianity* (1553). He was arrested in France by the Roman church charged with open heresy of the Trinity. Found guilty, he was to be burned slowly at the stake, but the Genevan Libertines bribed the jailers to enable Servetus to escape to Geneva (with their hope he would disturb Calvin and the city authorities). The Geneva Council granted Servetus asylum, but not to publically speak or promote his heresies. He breached the civil authority's directives, as open heresy was a crime in Geneva also, so he was again sentenced by burning at the stake. Calvin was deliberately excluded from investigations and interaction regarding the civil trial<sup>14</sup>.

This event is often erroneously presented as a slight on the character of Calvin. Impartial examination would note it is not consistent with aspects of his life and teaching. Firstly, his first published work was a commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, regarding the benevolence of sovereigns. Calvin did endorse the capital punishment of the current **civil** laws (for heresy, sedition and anarchy), he pleaded for clemency, from burning, in favour of beheading. This was rejected by the Council. Many antagonists of Calvin claim he may have argued more vehemently for a favourable outcome for Servetus, which may be a valid assessment. It must never be forgotten, Servetus was already sentenced as a heretic in France. That being said, Calvin wrote about the publication with words to the effect, *I neither hate, nor despise, nor persecute you [Servetus], but would be hard as iron to see you insulting sound doctrine with such great audacity*<sup>15</sup>.

Secondly, Calvin didn't personally kill Servetus or even attend the presiding court. Many opponents claim Calvin to be a murderer or "blood-thirsty", however this does not bear true when reading his sermons or other works. Calvin didn't search for Servetus in Geneva, but randomly recognised him and rightly reported him to the civil authorities (for breaching the local laws).

Thirdly, Calvin repeatedly attempted to instruct and correct Servetus' in his false doctrines. He even claimed in his letters he regretted he wasn't able to convince him<sup>16</sup>. Christian theologians and philosophers should treat all men (including Calvin) comparable with the heroes of faith (Heb.11). They are flawed men (sinners), saved by grace, and providentially and sovereignly used by Almighty God.

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<sup>13</sup> Reeves, M. (2010). *The Unquenchable Flame: Introducing the Reformation*. Inter Varsity Press. 105-107.

<sup>14</sup> Reeves, M. (2011). *On Giants' Shoulders: Introducing Great Theologians from Luther to Barth*. Inter-Varsity Press. 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> Hageman, G. E. (1950). *Sketches From The History Of The Church*. Concordia Publishing House. 61-62.

<sup>16</sup> Downton, R. K. (2003). *An Examination of the Nature of Authority in the Church in the Sixteenth and Twentieth Centuries and the Implications for Inter-church Relations in the Twenty-first Century* (pp. 40–54) [PhD Thesis].  
<https://web.archive.org/web/20040610215638/http://home.messiah.edu/~kdownton/NatureOfAuthority.pdf>. 51-54.

## **Conclusion**

Calvin was orthodox and emphasised the doctrines of the five solae. He was Theocentric (*Coram Deo*, in all matters, based on His supreme sovereignty and authority). He enhanced the concepts of the *Doctrines of Grace* (which modern theologians refer as *Augustinianism* or *Calvinism*)<sup>17</sup>. Based on his studies, Calvin refuted the false gospel of Rome (with Luther, Zwingli and others), combatted the antinomianism of the Libertines, fought the fanaticism of the Anabaptists, battled the church:state (Roman church:Holy Roman Empire) solidarity, and addressed the heresy of the Unitarians. Calvin was a man who truly served the Lord and His people, whose legacy remains in many Protestant churches to this day.

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<sup>17</sup> Gibson, J., & Earngey, M. (Eds.). (2018). *Reformation Worship : Liturgies from the Past for the Present*. New Growth Press. 300-337.

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20040610215638/http://home.messiah.edu/~kdownton/NatureOfAuthority.pdf>
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