

Martin Luther was the initiator of the Reformation. He lit the spark that started it burning. John Calvin was the theologian of the Reformation. He developed Luther's insights into a biblical system of theology. Luther laid the foundation of Evangelical religion. He rediscovered the centrality of the Bible and the Gospel of Justification by Faith. Calvin built the building. He taught Christians how these two principles worked out in faith and life.

Throughout the 1520's, Christianity (then known as "Lutheranism") grew rapidly in Europe. With this rapid growth came a lot of questions and confusions. Did the new faith support the Nicene Creed? Was it against the government? Was it antinomian, allowing Christians to sin? Did it believe in continuing revelation? Did it honor the Church fathers? What were its views on Infant Baptism, Christian Society, the Sacraments, Church government, worship, the role of a pastor, etc.? By the 1530's, Roman Catholics and European governments were accusing Christians of immorality, heresy and social anarchy. Calvin gave the first detailed answer to these questions and objections.

We do not know a lot about Calvin's conversion. Although he wrote many volumes, he did not often speak about himself. As Wellman tells us, he came under the influence of Christianity around 1530 and God converted him around 1532. Within one year, Christians from all over France were coming to ask him questions. Calvin realized the need for a "handbook" on Christian faith and practice. So, in an astoundingly short time, he wrote the first version of the "Institutes of the Christian Religion". He had it published in 1536. It was not really a small book. It was about 400 pages. However, Calvin had the first version published in a small form. He wanted ordinary Christians to be able to carry it in a coat pocket without danger of discovery. (The 1559 version would run to about 2000 pages. Calvin Press has recently published a Chinese version in two large volumes.)

There are various ways to summarize the teaching of Calvin. Perhaps the most well known is the "Five points of Calvinism". As Wellman points out (following Warfield and many others), this is only one part of Calvin's teaching. Another popular summary is the "Five Solo's": the Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, the Glory of God alone. This is a fuller account of Calvinism. In "Calvin and Augustine", Warfield summarizes Calvin with three points: a pure theology, a pure religion, a pure gospel. In the 1559 institutes, Calvin himself divides his teaching into four books. We can summarize the four books as God the creator, God the Redeemer, the way of salvation (which we might call "God the Holy Spirit"), and the Church. In all four of these areas, Calvin makes significant contributions to Christian theology. Let us briefly look at these four in order.

The hallmark of Reformed theology is a high doctrine of God the creator. We might summarize all of Calvinism as "God alone" [translator: 神本主義]. In Calvin's thought, God is at the center of the universe in every way. He created the world out of nothing. He rules it according to his sovereign will. He is the infinite, eternal, and immutable king of kings and lord of lords. Before Him all the nations are like a drop of water in a bucket. In Calvinism, God is the source of all our good. "Every good gift comes down from heaven above." Pure theology calls us to rely completely on him, though a life of humble prayer. Pure theology calls us to look to him for our every need. Pure theology calls us to call on him in our times of trouble. Some rely on influence and money; but our eyes look to the Lord our God. Some

boast in who they are and what they have done. A Calvinist knows that all that we have is a gift from God, and so we boast in the Lord alone.

In the 1530's Christians were being accused of denying the Nicene and Athanasian creeds. Calvin replied with a high and clear doctrine of God the Son. Before Calvin and after him, even the best of Christian theology is often plagued with "Subordinationism". Even while we affirm the divinity of Christ, we often implicitly hold that the God the Father is the "real" God. In an extreme form, some hold that God the Father is immutable, but that when Christ came into the world, God the Son changed. Some hold that God the Son suffered in his divine nature on the Cross. Calvin repudiated all such teaching. He affirmed both the full humanity of the Son and the full *and* unqualified equality of the Father and the Son. He writes (Institutes 2.8.6):

They thrust upon us as something absurd the fact that if the Word of God became flesh, then he was confined within the narrow prison of an earthly body. This is mere impudence! For even if the Word in his immeasurable essence united with the nature of man into one person, we do not imagine that he was confined therein. Here is something marvelous: the Son of God descended from heaven in such a way that, without leaving heaven, he willed to be borne in the virgin's womb, to go about the earth, and to hang upon the cross; yet he continuously filled the world even as he had done from the beginning. [Note to translator: you might copy this from Pastor Chien's translation of the Institutes - giving him credit of course.]

Perhaps Calvin's greatest contribution to our knowledge of God, is his teaching concerning the Holy Spirit. As Warfield says, Calvin developed the doctrine of the Holy Spirit more fully than anyone before him. (And in fact, it has been front and center in Christian theology since Calvin.) Warfield call Calvin "the theologian of the Holy Spirit". Calvin taught that from A to Z the application of salvation is the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we are born again, we are able to understand God's word (spiritual men discerning spiritual things), we are fully assured that God's word is indeed God's word, we see our own sinfulness, we are drawn to Christ in love, we are willing to abandon all that we might have Christ, we believe, we persevere in faith and good works, and finally, we are received into Glory. Of course, this implies the doctrine of Predestination. And Calvin begins his discussion of predestination with this point. The doctrine of Predestination is necessary (and precious to Christians), because it tells us that salvation is from the Lord and not from ourselves. Calvin writes (Institutes 4.21.1):

We shall never be clearly persuaded, as we ought to be, that our salvation flows from the wellspring of God's free mercy until we come to know this eternal election.

With respect to the Church, Calvin gave us its spiritual authority to rule over itself (i.e. the church is not under the government), Presbyterian, the sacraments as signs and seals of grace, reverent biblical worship, and above all, Church discipline. Calvin had a deep respect for Martin Luther. He often refers to him as "our Father in the faith". However, he was not happy with the lack of Church discipline that he saw in Lutheranism. The Church has the spiritual authority to appoint its own pastors and elders. On the one hand, these pastors and elders have the privilege and responsibility to accept people into the

church. They have the right to baptize and to offer Christians the Lord's Supper. On the other hand, they have the responsibility to exercise Church discipline. They must bar unrepentant sinners from these same sacraments. Calvin insisted on this in Geneva. He left Geneva in 1538 because the government refused to give the Pastors the authority to exercise Church discipline. He only returned in 1541 after the government promised that the Church would have this authority. In 1553, the Church put a man under church discipline for adultery. He was an influential citizen, and he obtained permission from the government to receive communion. Calvin refused. In a very tense moment, before he served communion, Calvin told the congregation he would never knowingly give the Lord's supper to an unworthy man.

The purity of Calvin's thought and his high principles have had a deep effect on his true followers, i.e. Calvinists. Schaff (History, Vol 8, sec 66) writes:

Calvin found the commonwealth of Geneva in a condition of license bordering on anarchy: he left it a well-regulated community, which John Knox, the Reformer of Scotland, from personal observation, declared to be "the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles," and which Valentin Andreae, a shining light of the Lutheran Church, likewise from personal observation, half a century after Calvin's death, held up to the churches of Germany as a model for imitation.

The moral discipline which Calvin introduced reflects the severity of his theology, and savors more of the spirit of the Old Testament than the spirit of the New. As a system, it has long since disappeared, but its best results remain in the pure, vigorous, and high-toned morality which distinguishes Calvinistic and Presbyterian communities.

A distinguished Scotch divine (Principal Tulloch) echoes this judgment when he says: It was the spirit bred by Calvin's discipline which, spreading into France and Holland and Scotland, maintained by its single strength the cause of a free Protestantism in all these lands. It was the same spirit which inspired the early and lived on in the later Puritans; which animated such men as Milton and Owen and Baxter; which armed the Parliament of England with strength against Charles I., and stirred the great soul of Cromwell in its proudest triumphs; and which, while it thus fed every source of political liberty in the Old World, burned undimmed in the gallant crew of the 'Mayflower,' the Pilgrim Fathers,—who first planted the seeds of civilization in the great continent of the West."

Obviously, Schaff is not a fan of Calvinism. His views are part of the historic caricature of Calvin and his followers. However, he knows (and the quote shows) that the spirit of Calvin produces remarkable men and movements; the highest and purest movements Christianity has ever known.

Wellman writes his biography of Calvin in Junior High school English. He uses very short sentences, very few relative clauses, and very few passive verbs. However, it is not Junior High school in content. The book is full of historical facts, and he paints a picture of both John Calvin and the times. Of course, in 200 short pages he cannot give a full biography of Calvin, little less a history of the Calvinistic Reformation. But the book is a useful place to begin the study of John Calvin. Wellman is well

acquainted with both the facts and the various interpretations of the facts that scholars have given. In general, he gives us a positive picture of Calvin. He presents him as a man with a family, with emotions, with friends, and with a deep love of Christ.

This said, there are some points that could be improved on. Wellman shows virtually no knowledge of the history of the Reformed faith (Beza, Scottish Presbyterianism, English Puritanism, seventeenth century Reformed Scholasticism, American and Dutch Reformed theology, etc.). At two points, he presents the popular character of "Puritans" as puritans. After a description of Christian liberty (which the real Puritans insisted on as much as Calvin), Wellman writes (English, p. 114),

This sentiment of John's is the antithesis of what later came to be called Puritanism. Yet in the centuries to come, people ignorant of what John Calvin actually expressed in the *Institutes* would label him as an austere Puritan.

In the last chapter, we have a "Calvin" against the "Calvinists" motif. The Reformed Church in all of its branches has always held to the five points of Calvinism. However, Wellman labels those who hold to these five points as "hard line" Calvinists. He then labels a system of theology that is very close to Arminianism as "Moderate Calvinism". He tells us that

These five conclusions of Moderates presented by Geisler are much more widely accepted by "Calvinists" of the twenty-first century than those discussed above for the Synod of Dort [i.e. the five points of Calvinist].

Finally, he attempts to downplay Calvin's doctrine of predestination. The doctrine in its pure form, we are told, was not held by Augustine until he was sixty-five. It laid dead until Calvin adopted it. And today, only "hard line" Calvinists hold to it. It appears Wellman is under the influence of the Dispensational interpretation of "Calvinism".

Despite these failings, the book is a good place to begin research into John Calvin, *the Father of Reformed Theology*.

Andrew McCafferty

Nov 2007