John Calvin (1509-1564) and Calvinism

Calvin Extract on Prayer
Institutes III.XX.3 Objection: Is prayer not superfluous? Six Reasons for it

Calvin’s teaching on prayer is great. This section details why it’s still important to pray even though God is sovereign… Answers some of the charges that an abuse of predestination brings…

I hope this extract motivates you to read some of Calvin’s writings – see this section in Reformation Classics published by Matthias Media.

1. Biographical Details

John Calvin is the first of the second generation of reformers that we’re studying. He was only 8 years old at the time Luther nailed his 95 theses in Wittenberg. And he was only 22 (and probably not yet converted) at the time of Zwingli’s death.

Some have argued that Calvin did not have many original theological insights (ref?) – his position often fell between that of Luther and Zwingli (on the issue of the sacraments, the place of good works in the Christian life, justification by faith etc.). Rather, he built on the ideas and experiences of others.

Yet it could also be argued that he had the greatest enduring legacy. By virtue of his writings and methods of training, Calvinism was the most easily transportable and implemented of all the “types” of Protestantism.

Calvin was French. He was born in 1509 in Noyon. He first was headed towards theological training before his father had a change in aspirations and directed him toward legal studies instead.

Significant Influences...

Calvin did not have a moment of conversion (of great theological insight) as Luther did. Rather there were a number of influences that made him the influential reformer that he became.

- Calvin’s father had worked for the local bishop, but had been excommunicated (and died so) because of a financial dispute with local clergy. This did not predispose Calvin to a positive view of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Calvin recognised the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church.
- Note however that Calvin had a strong recognition of divine sovereignty – seeing God’s hand in ultimately directing his ‘conversion’ outweighing other external influences… ‘But God subdued and made teachable a heart which, for my age, was far too hardened in such matters.’
- His study in civil law equipped him with methods and ideas useful for reforming
  - He learnt Greek and Latin
  - He developed a clarity of expression
  - French humanism had an emphasis on understanding how a classical text could be applied to modern situations (useful for interpreting the Bible too)
- His move to Paris exposed him to Lutheran ideas

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1 PTC notes p88.
- Although, he had to flee to Basle, when a sermon by Nicholas Cop, the rector of the University, was recognised to contain Lutheran themes. It seems that Calvin helped write the sermon.
- In Basle, Calvin was able to write his first edition of the *Institutes* (started at 6 chapters and ended with 80).
- Calvin then went to Noyon to break with the church there — who had been supporting him with a scholarship. This is taken to be the date of his conversion, as he could no longer sincerely receive their financial support.
- He decided to settle in Strasbourg for a life of private study. However, the road there was blocked because of a battle between the King of France and the Emperor. He made a detour to Geneva.
- In Geneva, he was challenged by Farel. Farel, burning as he was with a marvellous zeal to promote the gospel, instantly put forth all his efforts to detail me... when he saw that he was gaining nothing by entreaties, he went as far as an 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... It was as though God had stretched out his hand from above and laid it on me in order to stop me.'²

So Calvin remained in Geneva.

2. Geographical Considerations

**Geneva (1536-1538)**³

Geneva was a city surrounded by opposing political pressures. Unlike Germany, in Geneva political reformation came first, and the religious reformation was only a consolidation of the political one.

The two opposing political forces in the region were: the House of Savoy to the South, and the Swiss city states (of Fribourg and Berne) to the North of Lake Geneva. The city of Geneva had been traditionally ruled by a bishop-prince and council. Over time the bishop-prince had become aligned to the house of Savoy. Geneva, however, became split between Savoyard and Swiss interests.

In 1526 some of the city members drew up a formal alliance with the Swiss, and easily triumphed the bishop-prince (who fled to the Catholic Swiss city of Fribourg). The Swiss were a stronger military ally, and the negotiators were superior political agitators.

Once political reformation was successfully achieved, then religious reformation began. This led to some fracturing in the political alliance. As the religious reform occurred in a protestant direction, relations with Fribourg cooled. Berne tried to fill the vacuum by imposing their political will on the city. The Genevans, however, having won their sovereignty were loathe to relinquish their hard won freedoms to a new regime.

In 1536, Geneva completely accepted the Reformation pledging ‘to live according to the law of the Gospel and the Word of God, and to abolish all papal abuses.’

Calvin had set and strict ideas about what living according to God’s Word entailed. He spelt these out in his 1537 21’Articles on the Organisation of Church and Worship’ which elucidated his understanding of the Church’s roles in Genevan moral and political life. And he also wrote a new catechism entitled ‘An instruction in the Faith’ which defined the responsibilities of individual Christians. This in conjunction with his belief that the Church (not the city council) should be the arbiters of excommunication was too much

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² PTC notes p89-90.
³ Ozment, p358-62.
for the newly liberated Genevans and they dismissed Farel and Calvin from the city in April 1538.

Strasbourg
This was the destination of Calvin’s exile. He became a lecturer in the University and pastor to a French refugee church. He used the time to write his second edition of the Institutes, The Reply to Sadeleto (in which he rebutted the efforts of Cardinal Sadeleto to reclaim the city of Geneva for Roman Catholicism – an excellent summary of Protestant doctrine), and his first commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. It was here that he came under the influence of Bucer.

**Significance of Bucer…**
Ozment notes that you could almost write a history of the Reformation through writing Bucer’s biography.

‘Converted by Luther, yet also Zwinglian in his theology, he debated the leading Anabaptists, corresponded frequently with Erasmus, played power politics with Strasbourg magistrates and German territorial princes, became Calvin’s mentor, served as a chief Protestant negotiator with Catholics in the 1530s and 1540s, and spent the last years of his life (1548-51) in England assisting Thomas Cranmer with the English Reformation.’

It was from Bucer that Calvin learnt to implement reformation principles in a city. He learnt a simple church structure with four church offices, as well as an exemplary educational system for training (teaching of Greek, Latin, the Classics, as well as moral and religious training). Calvin however, criticised Bucer for his doctrinal compromise in his ecumenical and conciliatory efforts.

It was also in Strasbourg that Calvin was married, saying ‘I am none of those insane lovers who embrace also the vices of those they are in love with, when they are smitten at first sight with a fine figure. This only is the beauty which attracts me: if she is chaste, if not too nice or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested in my health.’

Geneva Again (1541-1564)
The religious and political situation had deteriorated in Geneva, and with a change in city council Calvin was asked to return. His task: to restore order and confidence with in the city. Calvin eventually decided to accept their offer and return. However, he returned very much on his own terms (see the extract of his letter of acceptance, PTC notes, p91).

His exile in Strasbourg had equipped him for implementing reform this second time around. Eventually opposition to his program of reform died out, and in the last decade of his life, Calvin had virtually a free hand in religious affairs.

This period allowed him to develop:

- his doctrine
- his organisation of the church
  - the consistory which enforced church discipline
  - the academy which was used to educate pastors

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4 Ozment, p364.  
5 Ozment, p365.
3. Theological Distinctions

- **Method**
  A key feature of Calvin’s theology was his change in methodology in comparison with medieval theologians. The methodology of medieval theologians was much more speculative in nature. They tried through philosophy to answer the question: “what is God”. Calvin by contrast wanted to change the question to ‘how is God toward us?’ We only know God in as much as he has revealed himself to us in scripture and pre-eminently in his Son. And this knowledge is genuine and final knowledge of God. There is much that we can know of God as revealed in the Son and in his Word. For Jesus is able to say, ‘anyone who has seen me has seen the Father’ in John 14:9. Luther by contrast thought that knowledge of God was hidden and inaccessible.

- **Justification by Faith**
  **Luther**: Justification by faith alone: human beings enter into a relationship with God through his gift of righteousness to them. The faith by which this occurs is personal (believing that Christ was born for us personally and has accomplished for us the work of salvation), concerns trust in the promises of God and unites the believer to Christ. Not that the sinner is justified because he/she believes (on account of his/her faith), rather all the sinner needs to do is receive it.

  **Zwingli**: For him, the reformation was more corporate than individual. A Swiss city took on the Reformation and became Protestant corporately. Thus, the focus was more one a corporate reformation of life and morals as the moral consequences of the gospel were worked out in people’s lives. (Not that he advocated justification by works in any way – it’s just a different focus.) In this scheme Christ’s role becomes that of an external, moral example.

  **Calvin**: For him, you can see a mediating position between Luther and Zwingli. Faith unites the believer to Christ which has a two-fold effect:

  1) justification: through Christ the sinner is declared righteous
  2) on account of the union with Christ (not their justification) the believer begins the process of becoming like Christ through regeneration

- **Predestination**
  Calvinism is known for its emphasis on predestination. Divine sovereignty came to be regarded as the organising principle for Calvinist theology. This was a feature of Calvinism long after Calvin was gone, and was a result of the application of an Aristotelian methodology.

  Calvin organised his Institutes in a way that made sense for teaching the material. Later Calvinists desired a logical method for organising the material and found in predestination a way of logically organising the material – indeed, a way of recasting all his teaching in terms of this doctrine.

  Calvin’s interest in predestination reflected his appreciation of the extent of divine sovereignty which he saw in his own life, as we have seen already. His development of his understanding of predestination, sprang from his observation that some people don’t take hold of God’s grace. His thought reflects a concern with human sinfulness and

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6 PTC notes, p 94-96.
7 McGrath, p101-31.
8 McGrath, p135-40.
divine omnipotence. It is logically necessary that if God chooses to save some than he also chooses to damn others – because God doesn’t do things by default. Ultimately Calvin thought that predestination rested in the inscrutable judgments of God (III.xxi.1).

4. The Spread of Calvinism

Check out the map on p50 of the PTC notes – to see the geographical spread of Calvinism throughout Europe.

- His writings
  In the Institutes, Calvin’s followers had in one volume a comprehensive and understandable statement of the Christian faith and how to implement it. Calvin was prolific and influential in the way he wrote commentaries (modern commentaries owe their structure and methodology to Calvin in large measure). The traditional way of writing commentaries had been to sort out the leading ideas into a systematic theology. Calvin by contrast approached the text with a continuous commentary or exposition of the language. He desired to let the text speak for itself by explaining the grammar and sentence structure in the original language. Calvin also wrote treaties on difficult topics, as well as being a letter writer of great productivity and wisdom.

- His training mentality
  The Academy in Geneva provided an arena for first class training. It gained a good reputation and thus was able to attract would be reformers from far and wide. They were also able to see the principles in action.

- The church structure
  Calvin’s structuring of the church with a strong lay base and a central teaching pastorate was easily reproducible even on a small scale.

- The key role for lay leadership
  Calvin’s emphasis on the importance of lay leadership made this ‘type’ of Protestantism appealing to the middle classes. It gave legitimacy to the political aspirations of the lower nobility. The success of Calvinism however, ultimately depended on the weakness of the monarchy. So Calvinism was able to flourish in Scotland, but was fairly well quashed in France.

Bibliography


Moore Theological College


9 PTC notes, p97-99.