

Respecting John Calvin

JOHN CALVIN SHAPED THE REFORMED FAITH, world-view, and church government. The Christian Reformed Church stands in his shadow—we've named churches, schools, colleges, and our seminary after him. But who was he? What was he like?

Calvin was a second-generation Reformer, born July 10, 1509. He was 8 years old when Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses on the Wittenberg Church door, Oct. 31, 1517. Coming along later gave Calvin an advantage. He hadn't been involved in the Reformation's turbulent, tangled early years—when Luther, Zwingli, Bucer, and Melancthon were trying to get their ideas sorted out and coordinated. Calvin built on what they accomplished and avoided the problems they'd fallen into. He pulled together what they began and completed it.

Some people view Calvin as a doctrinal computer hard-wired on predestination. Like the other Reformers, he dealt with predestination. As a second-generation Reformer, he smoothed out what his predecessors taught into the package that has shaped Reformed teaching ever since. But if you check his *Institutes*, you'll see that Calvin devotes more attention to prayer than to predestination. He was not fixated on predestination; rather, he championed Christian piety.

Some dismiss Calvin as cold and impersonal. To be sure, he was not the gregarious, heart-on-the-sleeve, speak-before-you-think Luther who put everything "out there." Like many of us, Calvin was reserved: he didn't hang all his feelings out for everyone to see. But his correspondence indicates how deeply he prized his friends. When his wife and later when his mentor and fellow Reformer Martin Bucer died, Calvin was nearly inconsolable.

Some have judged Calvin as Geneva's dictator. He would be surprised at that: for most of the time he served as the leading pastor in that Swiss city, the city council was not behind him. Yes, Servetus was burned in Geneva—and Calvin is regularly pilloried for that. But Servetus had already been condemned to execution as an anti-Trinitarian heretic in both Roman Catholic and Lutheran cities. Somehow Servetus managed to escape from both prisons. He made his way to Geneva, where he was arrested and condemned—but Geneva's jails had better locks. Like most people of the time, Calvin was willing to see Servetus executed, rather than infect others with his heresies. But Calvin pled, unsuccessfully, with Geneva's city leaders for a less tortuous execution than the burning Servetus suffered.

Calvin didn't receive the heavy dose of theological training most of the other Reformers did. Instead, he studied law in France. When some people hear that, they nod and figure it helps explain the heavy emphasis on law in the Reformed tradition. But actually, in 16th-century France law was the area of study that had been most affected by Renaissance emphases, which called scholars to return to the ancient sources and taught people how to handle those sources rightly. Calvin's teaching

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is not preoccupied with law, although he has a keen sense of responsibility before God and propriety before others. But his legal training taught him how to handle ancient sources like the Bible. Calvin's sermons and lessons on the Bible cover almost all its books. He did such a good job that his commentaries are still widely used today by biblical scholars and preachers.

John Calvin was only a man, but he has had wide and long-lasting influence. He deserves our gratitude and respect. ■

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