

HEROES OF THE CHURCH: John Calvin



I. John Calvin, the Man (1509-1564)

“We are not our own: let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deed. We are not our own: let us therefore not set it as a goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own: in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours. Conversely, we are God’s: let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God’s: let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God’s: let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal.” (3.7.1)

A. Early Life and Education

1. Doctorate in law (1532) from the University of Orléan

B. Conversion (1532-1534?) – “My heart I give you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.”

1. Seeds of the Reformation

C. The “Divine Detour” To Geneva – August, 1536

1. Exile to Strasbourg (1538-41) and Ministry with Martin Bucer
2. Return to Geneva and Transformation – September 13, 1541



“Geneva is the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in this earth since the days of the Apostles. In other places I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so sincerely reformed, I have not seen in any other place.” – John Knox (1513-72)

II. John Calvin, the Reformer

- A. Education – The Academy
- B. The Poor
- C. Ethics and God’s Moral Law
- D. Freedom of the Church
- E. Decentralized Politics

“He that will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin knows but little of the origin of American liberty.” – George Bancroft, *Literary and Historical Miscellancies*, 450.

- F. Doctrine of Vocation
- G. Music in the Vernacular: The Psalter
- H. Preaching the Whole Counsel of God’s Word

III. The John Calvin I Never Knew

“No servant of Christ, probably, since the days of the apostles and of the Gospel witnesses of their century, has been more grossly misrepresented or more maliciously maligned than the faithful, fearless and beloved Calvin.” – Henry Cole, *Calvin’s Calvinism*, 6.

- A. Myth = “Calvin was so obsessed with God’s predestination of individuals that he didn’t care about missions or evangelism.”

1. The Unoriginality of Election for Calvin – See Luther, Melanchthon, Bucer, Zwingli, Augustine!

“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 His eternal election.” (3.21.1)

2. The Missionary Zeal of Calvin

B. Myth = “Calvin was a cold, arrogant intellectual whose writings force God into an arbitrary box.”

1. Calvin humbly spoke only about what God has revealed in Scripture

“...it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself.” (1.1.2)

“In the name of God, I, John Calvin, servant of the Word of God in the Church of Geneva, weakened by many illnesses . . . thank God that he has shown not only mercy toward me, his poor creature, and . . . has suffered me a partaker of his grace to serve Him through my work . . . But, oh, my will, my zeal were so cold and sluggish that I know myself guilty in every respect; without His infinite goodness, all my passionate striving would only be smoke, indeed the grace itself which He gave me would make me even more guilty; thus my only confidence is that He is the Father of mercy who as such desires to reveal Himself to such a miserable sinner.”

- Dictated by Calvin for his will, April 25, 1564

2. Calvin was intensely attentive to the heart (read his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*)

Original Title of *Institutes* = *Basic instruction (institutio) in the Christian religion, embracing just about the whole sum of godliness, and all that needs to be known in the doctrine of salvation; a work very well worth reading by everyone zealous for godliness*

- a) Wrote *Institutes* to instruct people in reading Scripture and defend the faith “basely and wickedly defamed by those flagitious and perfidious flatterers”

“Still today, one simply cannot read [The Institutes] receptively without being searched, humbled, and challenged regarding one’s sincerity and progress (Calvin’s favorite word), or lack of it, in one’s personal Christian life.”
- J.I. Packer, Introduction to *A Theological Guide to Calvin’s Institutes*, xi.

“[The Christian Life] is a doctrine not of the tongue, but of the life. It is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.” (3.6.4)

3. Calvin knew he was not his own, but belonged to God because of Jesus Christ.

“Accordingly, the Christian must surely be so disposed and minded that he feels within himself it is with God he has to deal throughout his life.” (3.7.2)

“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” (Heb 12:1)