

**JOHN CALVIN: Theologian, Pastor-Preacher, Civic Leader, Lawyer (1509-1564)**  
**by Victor Shepherd**

Most people look upon Luther, large and laughing, as possessed of a heart as big as a house. Wesley's public image is a man whose compassion could never overlook a suffering human being. On the other hand, Calvin, sadly and mistakenly, is thought to suffer from a shriveled heart and an acidulated spirit.

A corrective is needed. A place to begin is with the warmth, the magnanimity, and the tenderness that are unmistakable in a note Calvin penned to Benedict Textor, the family physician who attended Calvin's wife, Idelette de Bure, in her final illness. In the midst of his grief over the death of his dearest, Calvin nonetheless thought to thank Textor for the latter's diligent work and ceaseless care. Recalling all that Textor had done, Calvin dedicated his commentary on 2<sup>nd</sup> Thessalonians to him, adding, "The memory of my departed wife reminds me each day how much I owe you, not only because she was repeatedly brought to health by your help, and on one occasion was restored from a serious and dangerous illness, but also because even in the last affliction which took her from us, you did everything that you could to help her as far as diligence, effort and application were concerned." In the same commendation Calvin adds, "I have noticed that in restoring or maintaining my own health...you were no less concerned about my ministry too, which ought to be dearer to me than my own life."

A ministry dearer to him than his own life summarizes Calvin's work as theologian, pastor/preacher, civic leader and even lawyer. Concerning the lattermost role, towards the end of his sojourn in Geneva Calvin even drafted the city's constitution, inasmuch as he was the most able among the many lawyers living in the Swiss city. Despite his legal expertise, however, Calvin's theology is without a legal cast. Calvin tells us in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, that it was the gospel that had rendered him "teachable" (*subito*) in 1534, amidst his ascendant career as a

humanist scholar. *Subito* — Calvin appeared to think in Latin — can mean “suddenly” or “unexpectedly”. More likely “unexpectedly” is what he has in mind here, inasmuch as he would later affirm consistently that there are no natural anticipations of the work of the Holy Spirit; only God’s grace prepares us for the reception of grace, however much that preparation might be prolonged.

All theology is written in a specific historical/social setting. Calvin was a refugee, ministering soon to French refugees in Strasbourg (1538-1541), and thereafter to the waves of French refugees who swelled the population of Geneva. His plangent, “We have no other place of refuge but his [i.e., God’s] providence” evinces his awareness that life is precarious — as kings and armies all around Geneva threatened the nascent congregation, treachery within the community did its accustomed worst, disease and accident appeared with the regularity expected of them — and all of this punctuated by outbreaks of the dreaded plague.

Still, the refugee who pined for France all of his adult life managed to put his stamp on peoples far afield. The Huguenots whom he inspired in France found theological siblings in Britain. It was the opinion of the French social historian, Elie Halevy, that Wesley’s 18<sup>th</sup> century Methodism redressed socio-economic inequities in Britain, and thereby forestalled a revolution as bloody as France’s turned out to be. It is now recognized that it was the work of Calvin-inspired Puritans 100 years earlier; it was the “Bloodless Revolution” of 1688 that spared the country gore and guillotine. On this date the power of parliament eclipsed that of the crown, thus eliminating royal absolutism.

The theological foundation of this development was actually Calvin’s notion of “total depravity”, a theological affirmation much despised by moderns who fail to recognize the manner in which it supports democratic institutions. In speaking of total depravity, or the bondage of the will, Calvin was not denying that we are able to make choices among creaturely entities. We are free to choose where to live, what to eat, how to employ ourselves, what options to exercise anywhere in the creaturely welter we come upon every

day. What he is questioning is that we are free to will ourselves out of our sinnership; he is saying that we cannot restore ourselves to the stature we forfeited in the Fall. God reaches out to us and does for us what we shall never do for ourselves. In this matter Calvin denies that any one part of us can save the rest. Only grace realigns our affections, restores reasoning to reason's integrity, and allows us to will our salvation as grace conforms our will to God's. Calvin's spiritual descendants in both the Old World and the New grasped Calvin's point; namely, that since *all* alike are in bondage to sin and self-interest, *no one person or party* can be trusted with absolute power. Calvin's theology, together with its social and political concomitants, came to influence public and private life profoundly in Holland, Switzerland, Scotland and what was to be the United States of America. The widespread reconfiguration of the self-understanding of both institutions and individuals that is now associated with a democratic ethos appeared initially in countries where the Calvinist Reformation was most influential.

Calvin's achievement is multidimensional. Calvin imparted the characteristic shape to modern French as surely as Luther did to German and Shakespeare did to English. (Calvin's French, 500 years old, can readily be understood by anyone with a high school reading ability in French. His French is elegant in the mathematical sense of "elegant": it generates the profoundest understanding from the fewest, pellucid statements.)

Always aware, as a humanist scholar, of the need for a sound education in the liberal arts, and now committed to a learned ministry, Calvin established the Geneva Academy. On June 5th, 1559, St. Peter's cathedral hosted the inaugural service. The statutes Calvin had prepared (again on account of his educational wisdom and his legal expertise) were read. One of the luminaries Calvin had lured to teach in the Academy was Theodore Beza, who was named as well the first rector. He addressed the congregation in Latin, rehearsing the salient peaks in the history of education and commending city authorities for supporting an educational endeavour that disdained superstition. Calvin presided at the event

but was near-invisible, content to speak briefly (in French) and close the meeting with prayer.

Recognizing the place of language study in both classical learning and Renaissance humanism, the Academy fostered fluency in written and spoken French, together with Hebrew, Latin and Greek. The school began with 162 students; in six years it was enrolling over 1500. Upper level programmes included law, medicine and theology, the lattermost attracting the largest number.

Twenty-four years later, Calvin's Academy (eventually known as the University of Geneva) gave birth to the University of Edinburgh (Scotland's fourth university), and one year after that to Cambridge's Emmanuel College, an institution that became a Puritan stronghold in the reign of Elizabeth I. (The United Church's Emmanuel College, Toronto, was named after its Cambridge foreparent.)

Not to be overlooked is Calvin's contribution to social welfare. Repudiating the mediaeval notion that the poor are spiritually privileged and extraordinarily blessed, and rejecting as well the notion that the rich can accumulate salvific merit by assisting the poor, Calvin spurned the notion that the poor are such because God has appointed them to economic misery. Calvin implemented in Geneva the civic apparatus needed to assist the sick, the poor, the refugee, the persecuted. Calvin's most vehement ire was directed at those who practised a certain kind of usury. Admittedly, Calvin supported the shift from mercantilism to capitalism, the economic feature of the shift from the mediaeval era to the modern. In this regard he approved of interest charged on business loans. Interest paid on money was no different in principle from the legitimate charges levied on renting a home or a horse. Interest, however, charged on loans for "consumption" (life's basic necessities) he regarded as a crime. No one should charge interest on loans to the poor; no one should suspend charitable giving in order to have money to invest; the borrower should make no less through a loan than the lender made from it; public good is to take precedence over private; since much is legal that is yet sub-Christian, the gospel

and its implicates must govern all economic matters. Begging, a feature of mediaeval village life, was outlawed in Geneva since begging demeaned the poor; the latter were to be assisted in their need, not rewarded for their importunity. Sadly, while Calvin's influence was widespread his control was slight; several pastors loaned money inappropriately, and one of the most prominent, Nicholas des Gallars, was nothing less than a loan shark.

### **Calvin As Theologian**

Calvin's genius appeared chiefly in his theology. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (there were five Latin editions between 1536 and 1559, with French translations appearing within a few years of the Latin) became by far the chief literary influence arising from the Reformed tradition. The earliest edition contained six chapters; the last, 80. The arrangement of the *Institutes* followed the major divisions of the Apostles' Creed. The work expanded with each edition as Calvin incorporated fresh material from his reading of Patristics, fellow-Reformers and the Mediaeval thinkers; he added as well his comments upon the theological controversy now swelling everywhere. The ever-thickening *Institutes* meant that the rebutting of detractors could be kept out of the commentaries on scripture, as Calvin preferred to reserve his commentaries for expounding the text of the Bible — unlike, for instance, Melancthon's, whose commentaries intercalated exegetical material with theological polemic, thereby making it difficult for a reader to retain the exegetical thread and logic of any one book of the Bible.

In the preface to the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* Calvin informs the reader of his twofold purpose: to assure Francis I, King of France, that his Protestant subjects were not seditious, and to provide a primer for neophyte students of theology. The primer was more than an introduction; it was a conspectus that provided the student with a theological overview that would acquaint the reader with the major building blocks of the Christian faith and simultaneously allow the reader to see crucial doctrines in their interconnections and possessed of their inherent logic. In this way

the *Institutes* provided a ready-to-hand check on the student's exegesis of scripture. It was never meant, however, to function as a lens through which scripture thereafter had to be read. (Much of the Calvinist tradition arising from Calvin, regrettably, appeared to do precisely what Calvin abhorred: materially it privileged the Calvin *corpus* over scripture while formally denying that this development was underway. The result was that scripture was allowed to speak only in a recognizably Reformed accent. Calvin's 30-year theological struggle to maintain the precedence of the Bible over tradition was thereby repudiated frequently by those who deemed themselves his best interpreters and staunchest defenders.)

It is impossible to exaggerate the influence of Calvin's single largest work. The book lodged itself at the bottom of the minds of Reformed Christians everywhere in Europe, Britain and the New World, thereafter to effervesce both consciously and unconsciously for centuries among those who had been steeped in it. All Protestantism outside Lutheran lands stands on Calvin's shoulders. Wesley's *Works* reflect his debt to Calvin on page after page. Wesley admitted that there was but a "hair's breadth" between him and Calvin (the hair's breadth being, as expected, the doctrine of predestination.) Most of the Anglican Evangelicals of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were Calvinists, among whom were George Whitefield and John Newton. Baptist, Presbyterian and Congregationalists would not exist without him. And of course the *Institutes* continued to spill over onto their descendents, most of whom would never be able to identify the source of so very much of their intellectual formation, their ethical attitudes and their nameless hunches.

At the same time it must be recognized that the *Institutes*, though 2000 pages long, occupies only 6.8% of Calvin's written output! His commentaries on scripture comprise 65%. Consummate systematic theologian that he was, he was chiefly a biblical exegete. Since Calvin is always working more closely with the text in his commentaries than he is in his *Institutes*, there are subtle yet profound differences between the two *genres*. Everywhere in the *Institutes*, for instance, Calvin insists that assurance of faith is an aspect of faith; to lack assurance is to lack faith. Undeniably he

strikes the same note in several places in the commentaries.<sup>1</sup> Yet in one of his glorious inconsistencies (thanks to his proximity to the text of scripture), when Calvin speaks in his commentary on John 20 of the women who go to the tomb on Easter morning to perfume a corpse, he modifies the severity he reflects everywhere else as he tells us that the women were possessed of a faith *they did not know they had*. In other words, they were possessed of genuine faith even as they lacked assurance of it. To be sure, Calvin maintains that their faith was “confused” and “mingled with superstition”; still it was *faith*.

In view of the fact that Calvin wrote ten times as much exegetically as he wrote systematically in the *Institutes*, anyone who neglects the commentaries has passed by Calvin’s treasure store.

## **Major Themes In Calvin’s Theology**

### **I: Predestination.**

Here Calvin has been hailed and hated alike; hailed by those who think him faithful to scripture and the Augustinian tradition, hated by those who regard his *decretum horribile* (Calvin’s expression) as nothing less than horrific and utterly indefensible.

Criticized for the doctrine even in Geneva, Calvin nonetheless insisted on the election-aspect of the twofold decree of predestination (election and reprobation) as good news and essential to the gospel. To understand Calvin here we might recall the five young men in Lyon who pleaded with the city officials in Geneva not to dilute the doctrine. The five had been imprisoned for their faith and were facing execution. Prior to being executed, however, they knew they would be tortured. They wrote to the Geneva officials, reminding them that tortured people, driven to the point

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<sup>1</sup> John Updike, one of American’s finest novelists, depicts a Presbyterian minister who has “lost” his faith and searches anxiously ever more deeply within himself in hope of relocating it. Updike has the novel’s narrator speak of “...the cruelty of a theology that sets us to ransacking our nervous systems for a pass to Heaven, even a shred of a ticket.” (*In the Beauty of the Lilies*, p.44.)

of derangement, might be found recanting what they had theretofore confessed as truth. They reminded the Genevans that they, the five, *had* to know that God's purposes for them were eternal and that nothing could loosen their Lord's grip on them even if they were beside themselves in agony and a cry of renunciation escaped their lips.

Calvin's intent, even in something as seemingly cold and abstract as the doctrine of predestination, is practical throughout. The decree of election safeguards the Christian fellowship from the ill-advised — because theologically inappropriate — spiritual sleuthing whereby some feel it is their task to sniff and snoop in the interest of detecting whose faith is real and whose is not. God alone searches the heart. Since we have no access to others' spiritual conditions, we are to regard as Christians all who call themselves Christians and leave spiritual assessment to God, who alone knows who are God's.

I am not suggesting that we can exonerate Calvin of all the theological difficulties that his *articulation* of the doctrine entails. At the same time, the ground of his argument was “where scripture speaks, the church must speak”.

## **II: Word and Spirit**

Everywhere Calvin insists on the inseparability of Word and Spirit, even as Word and Spirit remain distinguishable. This may seem an innocuous affirmation; it is anything but. The Word of God is the Incarnate One, attested by prophets and apostles, and announced in the church. If the Word is separated from the Spirit, however, it is rendered (supposedly) naturally intelligible; the truth of God (and ultimately *God*) is assumed to be rationalistically accessible — which denies the cognitive impairment, concerning God, of the Fall. The gospel is reduced to a philosophy that happens to use a religious vocabulary. On the other hand, if the Holy Spirit is separated from the Word unrestricted subjectivism can arise. At best the “Holy Spirit” is no more than human fantasy or speculation; at worst it is out-of-control religious extremism.

### III: Faith

Calvin consistently maintains that it is only by faith that we appropriate all that Christ has done for us. Calvin's fullest definition of faith is a classic: "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (*Institutes* 3.2.7).

Reading that definition, some may be surprised in his use of the word "knowledge". Faith is a kind of knowledge? Yes. For Calvin, faith is not wishful thinking, or merely cerebral belief, or sentimentality, or the product of metaphysical speculation. Faith *knows* God. Calvin even insists that knowledge of God is more certain than anything else we currently know, or may come to know; e.g., faith's knowledge is more certain than empirical knowing. Because such knowledge is "firm" it is foundational; everything in Christian discipleship is built upon this foundation.

All of which brings us to Calvin's use of the term "mercy". In the wake of the Fall, God's "benevolence" always assumes the form of mercy. Everywhere in Calvin mercy is not *a* word that God addresses us but *the* word that gathers up everything else that God says to us. In other words, while God speaks a word of comfort, a word of warning, a word of disgust, another of encouragement, all these diverse words are gathered up in the one, grand, all-inclusive word of mercy. Mercy characterizes all God's ways with God's people. Since sinners are covenant-breakers, the fulfillment of the promise on behalf of sinners is, again, sheer mercy. "Promise", then, always has to do with mercy.

The covenant is fulfilled in history, on behalf of humans who are historical agents, in Jesus Christ alone. Several aspects of Calvin's theology are found here. For instance, God always keeps his covenant with humankind; humankind in turn always breaks its covenant with God; therefore humankind's covenant with God is *humanly* kept by *God as human* (not by God sporting a human disguise, masquerading as human; the incarnation is genuine). By faith we covenant-breakers are thus clinging to the one covenant-keeper who is Jesus Christ.

While faith is not a natural phenomenon (it is always God's gift), and cannot be reduced to mental processes, faith unfailingly has a cognitive dimension because it is connected to historical events and what they mean. For this reason the church is always charged with offering *instruction*. Instruction concerning the mind, however, must be matched by assurance concerning the heart, or else faith is reduced to rearranging one's mental furniture with the heart unaffected and therefore with human existence unaltered.

As has been indicated previously, faith, together with the assurance of faith, is not natural human possibilities. Since the Holy Spirit is the power in which Jesus Christ acts, only Christ can bring us to faith in Christ. Therefore Christ "clothed with his gospel" is to be preached, thereby drawing faith out of people rather than lashing them into "belief".

#### **IV: Law and Gospel**

Nothing is farther from Calvin's theological conviction than the legalism of which he is often accused. According to him the law was given to acquaint God's people with the purposes of God, which are entirely positive. When the law meets our sin, however, its function changes. Now it renders us aware of our condition, i.e., our sinfulness. This function operates *per accidens*, "accidentally"; yet even as "accidental" it is *part* of the purpose of the law. Still, since Jesus Christ, the substance of the law, is given for blessing only, even in its "slaying" function the law is given for life.

Thus in those times when Calvin speaks of law and gospel as contradictory he always has in mind the law denatured, abstracted from the gospel, reduced to that for which the law was never given: a vehicle for promoting our own righteousness.

The "second" use of the law for Calvin (first for Luther) is to promote social order by inculcating fear of punishment, so as to constrain malfeasance — but there is no time to probe that issue here.

The "third" use of the law (its "chief" use, according to Calvin) is that by which believers obey Jesus Christ and are renewed in holiness. While law always has to do with the command of God,

mercy is the ground of God's claim upon our obedience. Therefore, believers find the claim not an imperious demand but an invitation: "God chooses rather to invite his people by kindness than to compel them to obedience from terror." (*Commentary* Deut. 7:9) Believers, grateful to God for a claim upon them that guides them through life's minefields, are "gently attracted, so that the law might be more precious than gold or silver, and at the same time sweeter than honey." (*Commentary* Exod. 20:1)

Throughout, Calvin's unyielding opposition to legalism finds him insisting that the Christian's obedience to the law is never that of conformity to a code. Since the nature of faith's obedience to the law is governed by the 'character' (*ingenium*) or disposition of the God who is sheer, self-giving love, self-giving love is what believers must render the *person* of God through their obedience to the law. It should be noted that Calvin's theological genius is reflected as much in his discussion of law and gospel as in another aspect of his work.

#### **IV: PRAYER**

Calvin's discussion of providence is one of the weakest areas of his theology, and would seem to render prayer pointless. While prayer certainly includes adoration, confession and thanksgiving, the heart of prayer remains supplication: we are pleading with God to grant what we cannot effect ourselves, to supply what we shall otherwise lack, to act in world-occurrence as befits one who is Creator and Lord. Calvin's doctrine of providence appears to come much too close to philosophical determinism. He recognizes his vulnerability on this point and denies that he has confused the dynamism of the biblical God, who is no bystander, with an omnicausality that renders God the author of sin and evil. Still, Calvin appears unable to exonerate himself.

In my opinion the problem is that in his discussion of providence he does not carry through on his insistence everywhere else that there is *no* knowledge of God apart from Jesus Christ. His probing of providence is virtually devoid of any mention of Christ. Calvin's sensitive, profound discussion of prayer, however, trumps his discussion of providence. When he comes to speak of prayer

Calvin insists that prayer, “the chief exercise of faith”, accesses Christ as that “overflowing spring” of all God’s promises vouchsafed to God’s people. Jesus Christ the Son gathers up himself and guarantees the fulfillment of the Father’s promises.

The fact that this “overflowing spring” is gift in no way diminishes believers’ need to *seek* in him what they have learned through the gospel to be vested in him. Calvin is relentless here: prayer is anything but fatalist acquiescence; believers must resolutely “dig up” by prayer the treasures of God’s promises as surely as someone, informed of treasure buried in field, will profit only if they pursue it. By “dig up” Calvin does not mean to pry out of, or coax from, a reluctant deity what people desperately need; just as surely, however, by “dig up” Calvin insists that prayer is a human activity that believers must prosecute with unrelenting ardour. Their importuning God, while never to be confused with badgering, attests more than merely their seriousness; it attests their undiluted confidence that God will perform all that has been promised.

God both invites believers to pray and commands them to pray. Since God remains “easily entreated and readily accessible”, not to pray can only announce one as churlish, disobedient and distrustful. Calvin insists that only through habitual, persistent prayer do believers confirm God’s generosity and care for them by “use and experience”; i.e., their heart-owned experience of God’s answer to prayer and the use they make of what God has given them in turn authenticate the efficacy of prayer and the promises of God. And of course only through habitual, persistent prayer is their spiritual alertness enhanced as they recognize answers to prayer and subsequently come to meditate “more ardently” on the kindness alone that supplies their need.

Consonant with his understanding of the ministry, Calvin wanted his remains buried in an unmarked grave. He was concerned lest some admiration for him exceed spiritual discernment, and there develop a cult of the saint around him, or his burial spot be regarded as a relic. In death, as in life, his characteristic exclamation remained *solī Deo gloria*.