

JOHN CALVIN

MODERN CHURCH HISTORY –SPRING 2024

EARLY LIFE AND CONVERSION

- Born in Noyon, France, in 1509, Calvin initially studied law but later transitioned to theology.
- Around 1533 he experienced a spiritual conversion that solidified his Protestant beliefs.
- Calvin described his conversion as a sudden and deeply personal encounter with God while reading the Bible.
- He fled France due to religious persecution and settled in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1536.
- Calvin married a young widow with two small children – Idelette van Buren. Her first husband died of the plague. Calvin was impressed by her faith. By all accounts, they had an excellent marriage, but all their children together died in infancy.

THEOLOGY

- Calvin wrote **Institutes of the Christian Religion** in 1536 at the age of 27, only a few years after his conversion. This is still his most influential work.
- Calvin's theology was shaped by three distinct values: a devotion to Scripture, an emphasis on individual faith and repentance, and a passion for reforming the church.

THEOLOGY OF GOD:

- Sovereignty: God is the absolute sovereign ruler of the universe, with complete control over everything.
- Predestination: God has predestined some for salvation, according to his perfect will.
- Trinity: God exists as three distinct persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - united in one essence.
- Justice and Mercy: God is both perfectly just and infinitely merciful, reconciling these attributes in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

HUMANITY AND SIN:

- Total depravity: Human beings are inherently sinful and incapable of good apart from God's grace.
- Original sin: Adam and Eve's sin corrupted all creation and brought sin and death into the world.

- Election and Reprobation: God chooses some individuals for salvation according to his purpose, while others are left to their own sin and condemnation.

SALVATION AND GRACE:

- Justification by faith alone: Salvation is not earned by good works but is a gift received through faith in Jesus Christ's atoning sacrifice.
- Predestination and human responsibility: While God predestines salvation, humans still have the responsibility to respond to God's grace in faith and obedience.
- Sanctification: The Holy Spirit progressively transforms believers into the image of Christ through their ongoing Christian life.

CHURCH AND SOCIETY:

- Authority of Scripture: The Bible is the sole authority for matters of faith and practice.
- Preaching and teaching: The Church's primary responsibility is to preach the gospel and teach God's word.
- Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper are outward signs of inward spiritual realities, but they do not have magical power.
- Church government: The Church should be governed by elders and deacons according to biblical principles.
- Christian living: Christians are called to live moral and disciplined lives in accordance with God's law and to actively contribute to society.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

- Calvin's emphasis on individual piety and social responsibility laid the groundwork for a Protestant work ethic and a commitment to social justice.
- Calvin's emphasis on education and literacy contributed to the rise of public education and intellectual development in Europe and beyond.
- Calvin's ideas on individual conscience, limited government, and the rule of law influenced the development of liberal democracy and Western political thought.

DEBATES AND CRITICISMS

- Calvin's role in establishing a strict religious regime in Geneva raises questions about the relationship between church and state and the potential for religious intolerance.
- The doctrine of predestination continues to be a point of contention, with critics arguing it can undermine individual responsibility and human agency.

FAVORITE QUOTES

- "Doctrine is not an affair of the tongue but of the life."
- "There is no worse screen to block out the Spirit than confidence in our own intelligence."
- "Here then is what God requires us to seek in examining ourselves: it requires the kind of knowledge that will strip us of all confidence in our own ability, deprive us of all occasion for boasting, and lead us to submission."
- "Whoever is utterly cast down and overwhelmed by the awareness of his calamity, poverty, nakedness, and disgrace has thus advanced farthest in knowledge of himself."
- "If it is the devil's word that exalts man in himself, let us give no place to it unless we want to take advice from our enemy."
- "The true wisdom of man consists in the knowledge of God the Creator and Redeemer."
- "We are not to reflect on the wickedness of men but to look to the image of God in them, an image which, covering and obliterating their faults, an image which, by its beauty and dignity, should allure us to love and embrace them."