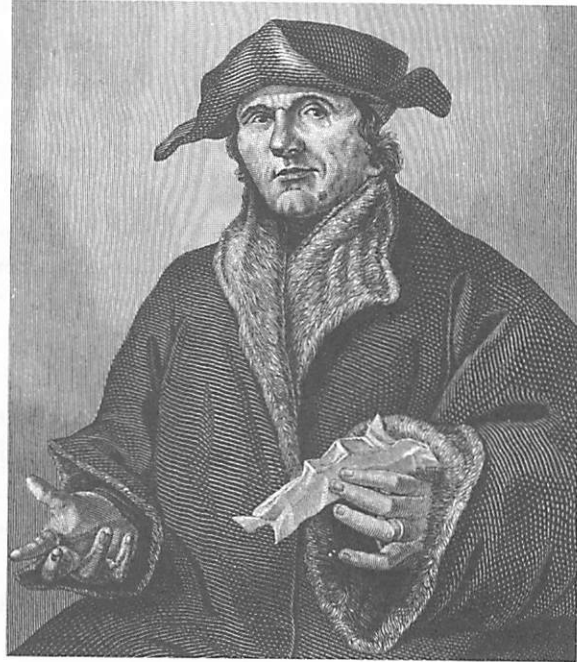


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JOHN
CALVIN

1509 - 1564



The famous Protestant theologian and moralist John Calvin is one of the major figures of European history. His views on such diverse subjects as theology, government, personal morality, and work habits have, over a period of more than 400 years, influenced the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

John Calvin (original name: Jean Cauvin) was born in 1509, in the town of Noyon, in France. He received a good education. After attending the Collège de Montaigu in Paris, he went to the University of Orléans to study law. He also studied law at Bourges.

Calvin was only eight years old when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, and thereby inaugurated the Protestant Reformation. Calvin was brought up as a Catholic, but as a young man he converted to Protestantism. To avoid persecution, he soon left Paris, where he had been living, and after traveling about for a while, settled in

Basel, Switzerland. There he lived under a pseudonym while he studied theology intensively. In 1536, when he was twenty-seven years old, he published his best-known work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This book, which summarized the essential Protestant beliefs and presented them in comprehensive and systematic form, made him famous.

Later in 1536, he visited Geneva, Switzerland, where Protestantism was rapidly gaining in strength. He was asked to stay there as a teacher and leader of the Protestant community. But conflicts soon arose between the fiercely puritanical Calvin and the Genevans, and in 1538, he was forced to leave the city. In 1541, however, he was invited to return. He did so, and he became not only the religious leader of the city, but also its effective political leader until his death in 1564.

In theory, Calvin was never a dictator in Geneva: many of the townspeople had voting rights, and much of the formal political authority was held by a council which consisted of twenty-five persons. Calvin was not a member of this council. He was subject to removal at any time (and was, in fact, expelled in 1538) if he did not have the consent of the majority. In practice, though, Calvin dominated the city, and after 1555 he was a virtual autocrat.

Under Calvin's leadership, Geneva became the leading Protestant center of Europe. Calvin consistently tried to promote the growth of Protestantism in other countries, particularly in France, and for a while Geneva was referred to as the "Protestant Rome." One of the first things that Calvin did after his return to Geneva was to draw up a set of ecclesiastical regulations for the Reformed Church there. These were to set a pattern for many other Reformed Churches in Europe. While in Geneva, Calvin wrote many influential religious tracts, and continued to revise the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He also gave many lectures on theology and the Bible.

Calvin's Geneva was a rather austere and puritanical place. Not only were adultery and fornication considered serious crimes, but gambling, drunkenness, dancing, and the singing of

ribald songs were all prohibited, and could result in severe punishment. Attendance at church during prescribed hours was required by law, and lengthy sermons were customary.

Calvin strongly encouraged diligence in work. He also encouraged education, and it was during his administration that the University of Geneva was founded.

Calvin was an intolerant man, and those whom he considered heretics received short shrift in Geneva. His most famous victim (there were quite a few) was Michael Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian who did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity. When Servetus came to Geneva, he was arrested, tried for heresy, and burnt at the stake (in 1553). In addition, several persons suspected of witchcraft were burnt at the stake during Calvin's administration.

Calvin died in Geneva, in 1564. He had married, but his wife had died in 1549, and their only child had died at birth.

Calvin's principal importance lies not in his direct political activities, but rather in the ideology he promulgated. He stressed the authority and importance of the Bible, and like Luther, denied the authority and importance of the Roman Catholic Church. Like Luther, St. Augustine, and St. Paul, Calvin held that all men are sinners, and that salvation comes not through good works, but through faith alone. Particularly striking were Calvin's ideas on predestination and reprobation. According to Calvin, God has already decided—and without regard to merit—who is to be saved and who is to be damned. Why, then, should an individual bother to behave morally? Calvin's answer was that the "elect" (that is, those persons whom God has chosen to accept Christ and thereby achieve redemption) have also been selected by God to behave righteously. We are not saved because we do good, but we do good because we have been chosen for salvation. Although such a doctrine may seem strange to some, there seems little doubt that it has inspired many Calvinists to lead unusually pious and upright lives.

Calvin has exerted great influence on the world. His theological doctrines ultimately gained even more adherents

than Luther's did. Though northern Germany and Scandinavia became predominantly Lutheran, Switzerland and the Netherlands became Calvinist. There were significant Calvinist minorities in Poland, Hungary, and Germany. The Presbyterians in Scotland were Calvinists, as were the Huguenots in France and the Puritans in England. Puritan influence in America, of course, has been both long and strong.

Calvin's Geneva may have been more a theocracy than a democracy, but the net effect of Calvinism has nevertheless been to increase democracy. Perhaps the fact that in so many countries the Calvinists were a minority made them inclined to favor restrictions on established power; or perhaps the comparatively democratic internal organization of the Calvinist churches was a factor. Whatever the reason, the original Calvinist strongholds (Switzerland, Holland, and Great Britain) became strongholds of democracy as well.

It has been claimed that Calvinist doctrines were a major factor in the creation of the so-called "Protestant work ethic," and in the rise of capitalism. It is difficult to judge the extent to which that claim is justified. The Dutch, for example, were

This monument in Geneva commemorates the Reformation; a statue of Calvin is at the extreme left.



reputed to be an industrious people long before Calvin had ever been born. On the other hand, it seems unreasonable to assume that Calvin's firmly expressed attitude toward hard work had no influence upon his followers. (It might be noted that Calvin did permit the charging of interest, a practice which had been condemned by most earlier Christian moralists, but one that was important to the development of capitalism.)

How high on this list should Calvin be ranked? The influence of Calvin has been confined primarily to western Europe and North America. Furthermore, it is plain that his influence has been sharply declining during the last century. In any case, much of the credit for the existence of Calvinism has already been assigned to earlier figures such as Jesus, St. Paul, and Luther.

Although the Protestant Reformation was an event of great historical importance, it is plain that Martin Luther was the person most responsible for that upheaval. Calvin himself was only one of several influential Protestant leaders who arose after Luther. It is therefore quite clear that Calvin must be ranked far below Luther. On the other hand, Calvin must be ranked well ahead of such philosophers as Voltaire and Rousseau, partly because his influence has extended over twice as long a period as theirs, and partly because his ideas have had such a profound effect on the lives of his followers.