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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

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Editor: John H. Armstrong

Associate Editors: Mark Coppenger
T. M. Moore
Thomas N. Smith
Ardel Caneday
Steve Board

Managing Editor: Anita Armstrong

Design and Production: Ragont Design

Subscriptions Manager: Bob Mulder

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The conviction of the staff and editors of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in America, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

John H. Armstrong

For most modern evangelicals the name of John Calvin is often associated with a system of theology that bears his name. If anything else is known about the famous Genevan Reformer of the sixteenth century it usually is the story of how Calvin consented to the death of the noted heretic, Michael Servetus. General misperceptions about the man, his character, and his theology, abound. Stereotypes, in this case, have become the norm.

Much more accurate and helpful is the insight of one contemporary writer, Sherwood E. Wirt.

It could be said that God laid his hands on the wrong man in John Calvin. A thin, timid, dyspeptic Frenchman with a scraggly beard, Calvin was basically a scholar who desired nothing better than to spend his life in libraries. Instead, he was thrust into the vortex of Europe's fiercest religious battles. Before he died in 1564 at the age of fifty-four, he had met the challenge, overcome his opposition, and become one of the most influential figures in religious history.¹

John Calvin clearly was a man who possessed incredible talent. He had a vigorous mind and an amazing gift to write. But in addition to these considerable strengths, he also had a few glaring weaknesses. His angry polemics, which were certainly not the greater part of his work, and mistakes in personal and pastoral judgment, conspired to prompt many, both in his time and ours, to despise him. Yet few today bother to understand this man *whole*, especially since it is far easier to recite a few popular (and sometimes false, or distorted) myths and move on to commonly assumed criticisms.

I first met John Calvin, as a great thinker and writer, second hand. I heard the usual stories, read a few quotes here and there, and decided that this was a harsh and mean-spirited man of no real importance to me as a pastor. In time I had to change my mind by reading Calvin for myself. I came to see that John Calvin was one of the most remarkable men in the history of the Christian church. Yes, he did have enemies for sure, but what great Christian doesn't? People insulted him regularly, even setting dogs on him on one occasion. Once they fired guns outside his house, overtly threatening his life. And yes, his enemies hurled suggestions of immorality at him, with no basis in fact at all. But, as Sherwood Wirt has further observed, there is much more to the real John Calvin than most modern Christians have seen or understood.

There was gentleness in Calvin not often mentioned. He knew how to retain the admiration and affection of his friends. During the twenty-seven years he was a pastor in Strasbourg and Geneva, he showed sensitivity and love for his parish members that is a model for today's ministers. He was tender and affectionate with his wife, Idelette. In her pregnancy, he was solicitous, and heartbroken when their son died. Calvin was a man acquainted with grief.²

Calvin was the chief architect of the Protestant Reformation. What Luther and Zwingli set in motion, John Calvin watered, ordered, and matured. He saw the doctrine of the church far more clearly than Luther or Melancthon. He believed that the church was "the family where God dwells" and thus understood the need to correct a number of medieval errors in the visible church by the Holy Scripture. He was also willing to carry the reform of worship further than others were, introducing congregational singing and a reformed liturgy consistently rooted in the Scripture.

And he gave to the visible church a representative form of government that regarded both the doctrine of ordained ministry and the priesthood of all believers seriously. The church, said Calvin, "is designed to glorify his grace, to honor his Son, to maintain his cause, to execute his will. Here is where his family is known, trusted, prized, obeyed, loved and enjoyed."

But Calvin was much more than a church reformer. He founded the University of Geneva. He never held any title other than pastor and teacher, preached the Bible almost every day during his decades in Geneva, and turned a wicked city into a model community where no police force was needed. Refugees fled to the city from other parts of Europe to taste the freedom of Christian civilization at work. Thus, it is commonly agreed that the most basic forms of political liberty in western democracy have their roots in John Calvin's thought. Emile Leonard suggested that Calvin "invented a new kind of man in Geneva—Reformation man—and in him sketched out what was to become modern civilization."³

But we can never appreciate Calvin and his thought until we understand his clear, biblical and well-conceived understanding of the majesty and grace of the triune God. It is his high view of God that drove him to most of what he did, even the excesses. In a generation that maintains such a low view of God, and a high view of man, Calvin is strong, but needed, medicine.

But I must concur with William J. Bouwsma, another important modern biographer of Calvin, who decries the widespread notion that Calvin's faith and life consisted simply in his being a "systematic and dogmatic theologian." The facts, in this case, are much more interesting and enlightening, than the fiction. Calvin thought of himself, first and foremost, as a biblical theologian. Further, he knew the limits of human theologizing, something his

modern followers do not always seem to know as clearly. Bouwsma writes that Calvin "valued system and expressed himself systematically only for limited, practical, and pedagogical purposes. Otherwise he distrusted the all-too-human impulse to systematize, above all in religious matters." Calvin himself wrote that, "Anyone who does not allow God to be silent or to speak as he alone decides, is striving to impose order on God, a thing disgraceful and repugnant to nature itself." He did not commit himself to rigid philosophical methodology and system building but to biblical exposition. He saw, Bouwsma says with a great degree of irony, that the Holy Spirit "taught with affection, [and] did not adhere so exactly or continuously to a methodical plan."⁴

In addition to this Calvin insisted that Christianity is, in its fulness and essence, paradoxical. The major articles of theology are "contemptuously rejected by the common understanding of men." What were these paradoxes for Calvin? He answered, "That God became a mortal, that life is submissive to death, that righteousness has been concealed under the likeness of sin, that the source of blessing has been subjected to the curse." As a result of this approach to theology Bouwsma correctly concludes that Calvin was "always ready to sacrifice systematic order in order to introduce into his discourse an unexpected imaginative insight, rhetorical elaboration, digressions, and repetitions that might serve persuasive, polemical, instructional, or other practical purposes."⁵

What was central to John Calvin's life and thought, and is often missed by Calvinists, is the recognition both of God's transcendence and our complete dependence for everything upon him alone. He had deep reservations about human knowledge, both its ability to express truth perfectly and its ability to know God completely. Strictly speaking, Calvin spoke of how believers "experience" God

more often than how they "know" God. He did not trust the logical and philosophical systems of his time for good reason. He understood that theology was finally not about mastering propositions or building constructs about the divine. This is true for many reasons but ultimately the reason is that fallen humans only know God's great deeds and mighty works in this present world *indirectly*.⁶

Randall Zachman, another contemporary biographer of Calvin, notes that in spite of all this wonderful biblical work Calvin is still sadly misrepresented by both modern academics and lay people. The common impression of Calvin and his theology could best be summarized this way, according to Zachman:

Calvin is a cold, logical, and rigidly systematic thinker.

Calvin is a man of one great book, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion of 1559*, which contains the sum of his system.

The central concept of Calvin's doctrinal system is God's sovereign omnipotence—a sovereignty that demands our complete obedience, and that necessarily entails the doctrine of election and reprobation.⁷

Zachman demonstrates that more recent analysis of the great Reformer's work and life have modified this portrait considerably by focusing upon the humanism of the man and the biblical nuance of his thought. This "new" portrait of Calvin is not without fault, for sure. Conservatives are right to see flaws here and there. But I believe the overall thesis leans in the right direction by underscoring the point I am making about Calvin. His intent, as a theologian and faithful minister of the gospel, was not to develop a system of theology, much less a rigid system to be placed down upon every text of the Bible, but to explore the meaning of Holy Scripture with the intent of experiencing God in Jesus

Christ by the witness of the Spirit. If this view of Calvin is right, and I believe it is, then the life and thought of this man could open whole new vistas of growth for church leaders. His life and approach to experiencing God could become a major instrument for renewing the church in our time. That is my prayer.

Author

Dr. John H. Armstrong has been the president of Reformation & Revival Ministries since 1991. He served as a pastor for twenty years and is now editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal*, and *Viewpoint: A Look at Reformation & Revival in Our Time*. A conference speaker, he is the author/editor of eight books and a contributor to three others. He is married, the father of two children and the grandfather of one.

Notes

1. Sherwood E. Wirt, "John Calvin: The Burning Heart," in *Moody Monthly*, (November, 1977), 119.
2. "John Calvin: The Burning Heart," 119.
3. "John Calvin: The Burning Heart," 119.
4. William J. Bouwsma, "The Spirituality of John Calvin" in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*. Edited by Richard C. Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing Company, 1992), 108.
5. "The Spirituality of John Calvin," 109.
6. "The Spirituality of John Calvin," 113.
7. Randall C. Zachman, "Theologian in Service of Piety: A New Portrait of Calvin," in *The Christian Century*, (April 23-30, 1997), 413.

The story is told about Calvin that one day at the table he was quiet for some time, whereupon Melancthon, associate of Luther, who was visiting Calvin, said jokingly, "I believe Calvin is thinking about a wife." Calvin admitted that he had been thinking along those lines. And being shy and timid he asked his bachelor friend Farel (who later at the age of 69 married a young lady of 18) to help him find a wife. When Farel asked him what kind of girl he would prefer he said, "I am not one of those insane lovers, who once smitten with the fine figure of a woman, embrace also her faults. This only is the beauty that allures me, if she be chaste, obliging, not fastidious, economical, and patient of my health." Several suggestions were made and even some proposals were given but none of them materialized. Finally, he married Idelette de Bure, a widow with two children, a member of his congregation. Her husband, who had been converted from Anabaptism (a radical form of Reformation teaching that broke with the covenant doctrine and therefore repudiated infant baptism) had passed away in February of 1541 and in August of that year she married Calvin. A son Jacques was born to them but he lived only a few days. Calvin had nothing but praise for his wife. At her death in 1549 he said, "I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, who if our lot had been harsher, would have been the willing sharer of exile and poverty and even death. While she lived, she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance." Calvin remained a widower the rest of his life.

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF JOHN CALVIN, JOHN H. BRATT