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JOHN CALVIN: THEOLOGIAN OF HEAD, HEART, AND HANDS

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JOHN CALVIN (1509-64): A GREAT LIFE IN BRIEF

Among leading figures in church history, perhaps none has been subjected to more abuse than John Calvin. A university professor once told his students that his conception of hell was being caught in an elevator stuck between floors for eternity with John Calvin one side of him and John Knox on the other. It is common to find Calvin portrayed as a heartless tyrant, a person without feeling, whose doctrine of predestination caused him to show no concern for the earthly needs of human beings or for their eternal destiny.

Character assassinations of Calvin began as early as 1562, when Jerome Bolsec (d. 1584), a former monk who had embraced the Protestant faith but later returned to Catholicism, produced a biography in which he accused the Reformer of arrogance, deceit, cruelty, and ignorance and charged him with gross immorality, including sodomy and a bogus claim that he could raise the dead. Bolsec reported that Calvin died cursing God.¹

Catholic Bishop Jacques Bossuet (1627-1704), a learned historian, contended Calvin was obsessed with a desire for fame, a man of authoritarian temperament who dealt cruelly with his critics.² J. M. Audin (1793-1851) wrote a biography of the Reformer in which he depicted him as a selfish despot who employed criminals to maintain his rule over Geneva, while André Favre-Dorsaz, writing in 1951, regarded Calvin as a joyless, morose, neurotic, sadistic dictator, a superficial thinker who misunderstood Jesus badly.³ More recent Catholic authors have been less harsh but still critical. Noted church historian Henri Daniel-Rops (1901-65), for example, admit-

¹ A lucid coverage of attacks upon Calvin's character together with a convincing defence appears in Richard Stauffer, *The Humanness of John Calvin*, tr. George Shriver (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2009 reprint of 1971 edition).

² Jacques Bossuet, *History of Variations among the Protestant Churches*, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 22-3.

³ Stauffer, *Humanness of Calvin*, p. 26.

ted Calvin was brilliant but viewed him as a self-centred fanatic with little regard for others.⁴

The famous G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) branded Calvin's theology a version of Manichaeism since, in his judgment, the Reformer regarded God as the source of evil.⁵ Richard H. Tawney (1880-1962), a noted economic historian, wrote 'in the struggle between liberty and authority, Calvin sacrificed liberty, not with reluctance but with enthusiasm' under a 'dictatorship of the ministry' comparable to the Committee of Public Safety in the French Revolution of 1793.⁶

Among Protestants too detractors of Calvin have been and continue to be numerous and vociferous. In his introduction to a French edition of Theodore Beza's *La Vie de Jean Calvin*, published in 1869, Alfred Franklin described the Reformer as a cold, domineering person without sympathy for human weakness, one who never displayed emotion. He denied Calvin understood the real character of Christianity, and he concluded Calvin was not sincerely seeking for truth.⁷

Perhaps the most unjust assault on Calvin came from one of his successors as pastor at the Church of St. Pierre in Geneva, Jean Schorer. This enemy of Reformed theology collaborated with Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig in 1930 to produce a biography of Sebastian Castellio (1515-63), a scholar in Geneva who eventually broke with Calvin because of doctrinal disagreements. Zweig took occasion in his book to assail the Reformer and his system of theology. Schorer next published his own diatribe in which he depicted Calvin as a heartless dictator.⁸

Evidence abounds that authors, some poorly informed, others malevolent, have portrayed John Calvin badly and thereby convinced many he was an evil person whose influence has been very harmful. Defenders of the Reformer have, nevertheless, not been few, among them some of the most illustrious and learned theologians, not all of whom wrote as Protestant partisans. Roger E. Matzerath, for example, a professor at Atonement Seminary in Washington, DC, treated Calvin courteously, even paying him tribute where he thought it was due. At the conclusion of his entry in

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Doubleday Books, 1956), pp. 106-7.

⁶ Richard H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1926), p. 119; Marilynne Robinson, 'The Polemic Against Calvin', in *Calvin and the Church*, ed. by David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services for the Calvin Studies Society, 2002), pp. 96-122. This is a keen analysis of how authors have affected Calvin's reputation.

⁷ Stauffer, *Humanness of Calvin*, p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967), Matzerath wrote with reference to the Reformer's ongoing influence:

Calvinism as an aim and tendency has contributed significantly to man's understanding of his relation with God, a radical acceptance of the will of God, an insistence on the lowly state of man before God, an insight into the power of grace, a powerful stimulus toward biblical faith in Christ, and most of all, a stern but exalted and even mystical appreciation of the sovereignty of God, the knowledge of whom is true and sound wisdom.⁹

Sometimes tributes have come from observers one might expect to be hostile. Ernest Renan (1823-92) was one such commentator, a renegade Roman Catholic known for his *Life of Jesus*, a thoroughly rationalistic interpretation, Renan maintained Calvin's success as a reformer and theologian was 'because he was the most Christian man of his century'.¹⁰

While conflicting appraisals of Calvin and his influence may never be resolved, the Reformer's legacy remains substantial and secure because of continuing resort to his voluminous writings available in many languages. John Calvin came from a *bourgeois* Catholic family with close connections to the church hierarchy. Gerard Cauvin, his father, was a notary-accountant serving the cathedral at Noyon, a position which enabled him to arrange subsidies for the education of his son, whom he directed to prepare for the priesthood at the University of Paris, where John earned the Bachelor of Arts at the College de Montaigu, a stronghold of scholastic theology-philosophy. Young Calvin demonstrated exceptional ability in his studies and was poised to pursue a career in the clergy when his father became alienated from the church due to a quarrel with cathedral officials which led them to excommunicate him. The elder Calvin then instructed his son to undertake the study of law, a discipline in which John once again excelled. He received the Doctor of Laws from the University of Orleans but never practiced law.¹¹ Instead, after his father died, he pursued classical learning at the College de France, where he studied

⁹ Roger Matzerath, 'Calvinism', *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, ed. by Faculty of the Catholic University of America, 17 vols (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1967), 2, p. 1095.

¹⁰ Quoted by Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976 reprint of 1910 edition), 8, p. 280.

¹¹ There is some uncertainty about where Calvin received his law degree. Theodore Beza, his closest friend, indicated it was at Orleans, but Hughes Oliphant Old places it at Bourges. See Beza, *Life of Calvin in Selected Works of John Calvin*, ed. by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnett, I (Grand Raids: Baker Book House, 1983 reprint of 1844 edition), pp. xxii-xxiii, and Old, 'Calvin, John',

Hebrew and Greek. Progress in these languages brought Calvin recognition from Catholic humanists eager for the reform of their church. Some of the critiques coming from those scholars may have aroused Calvin's curiosity about Protestant doctrines, although he had earlier studied with Melchior Wolmar (1496-1561), an expert in the Greek language, who had serious interest in Luther's ideas.

Calvin's initial publication as a humanist who employed the critical-historical method of scholarship did not impress the academic community in Paris, but he became well known nevertheless when his friend Nicholas Cop (c. 1501-40) incurred the charge of heresy. Cop was to be installed as rector of the university in 1533, but his address on that occasion led theologians there to accuse him of espousing Lutheran teachings. The lecture included criticisms of Sorbonne professors and implied approval of some of Luther's doctrine, especially his distinction between the law and the gospel. How much Calvin contributed to Cop is uncertain, but university officials blamed him for it. Cop and Calvin fled to avoid arrest, and thereafter Calvin studied Luther's writings carefully. By then he had lost all interest in law and had become, without any intention, a theological advisor to people troubled by religious controversies. In his own words, 'in less than a year [after his conversion] all who were looking for a purer doctrine came to learn from me, although I was a novice and a beginner'.¹²

The only personal account of Calvin's conversion appears in the preface of his commentary on the book of Psalms, published in 1557. There he wrote:

since I was so obstinately devoted to the superstitions of popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss..., God by a sudden conversion subdued... my mind, which was more hardened... than might have been expected from one of my early period of life. Having then received some taste of... true godliness, I was immediately inflamed with so intense a desire to make progress therein, that, although I did not altogether leave off other studies, I yet pursued them with less ardor.¹³

in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, ed. by Donald McKim and David F. Wright (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 46.

¹² John Calvin, *Calvin: Commentaries*, ed. by Joseph Haroutunian and Louise Pettibone Smith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 52. The fresh translations in this compendium make a delightful reading.

¹³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, I*, trans. and ed. by James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), pp. xl-xli.

Always a diligent student with a passion for knowledge, after his conversion, John Calvin made the Word of God the object of that passion. His first writing as a Protestant appeared in 1534 as a preface to a French translation of the New Testament, a labour of his cousin Pierre Robert Olivetan (c. 1506-38), one of the early instruments of the Holy Spirit to affect Calvin's conversion. Calvin assisted Olivetan in the translation and wrote a lengthy preface which displays his clear grasp of Evangelical beliefs, even at that early point in his development. He then declared 'every good thing we think or desire is to be found in... Jesus Christ alone... This is eternal life; to know the... only true God and Jesus Christ whom... he has established as the beginning, the middle, and the end of our salvation'.¹⁴

In this, his pioneer venture as a theologian, Calvin digressed to offer consolation to Protestants enduring persecution in France. To his oppressed brethren he said, 'if we be banished from one country, the whole earth is the Lord's; if we be thrown out of the earth itself, nonetheless we shall not be outside of his kingdom'.¹⁵

Calvin himself was no stranger to persecution, as his first ministry in Geneva attests. After leaving Paris as a refugee, he spent a few months in Navarre, where Queen Margaret (1492-1549), learned and refined sister of French King Francis I (1515-47), encouraged his efforts to cleanse the church of superstitions and corruptions. Calvin next went to Basel. There he composed the first edition of the book that would make him duly famous, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in 1536.

The *Institutes* at first served as its author's personal confession of faith, as he appealed to the King of France for toleration of his Protestant subjects whom the monarch had been persecuting.¹⁶ As his book underwent several expansions and translation into many languages, it acquired a status among Protestants comparable to that of the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas (c. 1227-74) among Catholics. Calvin's work differs from that of Aquinas, however, in that the Reformer refrained from blending Aristotle's philosophy with Scripture and relied upon the Word of God as self-attesting. Unlike Thomas, Calvin wrote for the edification and instruction of ordinary Christians rather than for other scholars, which accounts for the often devotional character of his book. As in his sermons,

¹⁴ Calvin: *Commentaries*, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, rev. ed., trans. and annotated by Ford Lewis Battles from the 1536 edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing House, 1986).

so in all of his writings this Reformer did not seek to display his vast learning but communicated life-transforming truths in simple ways.

On a stop in Geneva, while seeking seclusion for his studies, John Calvin met William Farel (1489-1565), who had been proclaiming biblical doctrines there since about 1521. Convinced Calvin would be a great asset in reforming that vice-ridden city, Farel cajoled the unwilling scholar to join him in the work of reformation. Calvin likened Farel's demand to 'the power of God's hand laid violently upon me from heaven. When he realized I was determined to study... in some obscure place... he said God would surely curse my peace, if I held back from giving help at a time of such great need.'¹⁷

The ministry of Farel and Calvin in Geneva did not last long, as the ruling faction obstructed the efforts of the reformers, especially in matters of public morality and the government of the church. In 1538 the magistrates expelled the troublesome preachers. In an honest revelation of his character Calvin later exclaimed:

I am by nature timid, mild, and cowardly, and yet I was forced... to meet these violent storms. Although I did not yield to them, yet since I was not very brave, I was more pleased than was fitting when banished... from that city.¹⁸

Still seeking a peaceful retreat to pursue his studies, John Calvin went to Strassburg, where Martin Bucer (1491-1551) had been leading the reformation. Rather than providing a serene place for scholarship though, Bucer, like Farel before him, constrained Calvin to participate in the ministry by becoming pastor to French refugees who had fled there to avoid persecution at home. The years 1538-41 in Strassburg were a time of productive writing and personal satisfaction, as Calvin preached regularly, lectured on Scripture, revised the *Institutes*, and published the first of his commentaries on the Bible, an exposition of Romans, in 1539. While in Strassburg he served the Protestant cause by meeting with Roman Catholic scholars to discuss matters in dispute, and during that stay he married Idelette de Bure, who became his loving companion until her death only nine years after their wedding.

While Calvin was enjoying a fruitful ministry and the encouraging friendship of Bucer, Jacopo Cardinal Sadoletto (1477-1542), Bishop of Carpentras in southern France, wrote to the governors of Geneva in an effort to restore Catholicism in that city. Known to be a moderate Catholic who desired reform within his own church and opposed repression of Protestants, Sadoletto may have thought the absence of Calvin made the time

¹⁷ Calvin: *Commentaries*, p. 53.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

opportune for reclaiming Geneva. Since no one then in Geneva was competent to answer the learned cardinal, Calvin, from his exile in Strassburg, accepted the challenge. With perhaps understandable bravado, Theodore Beza declared Calvin had replied ‘with so much truth and eloquence that Sadoletto immediately gave up the whole affair as desperate’.¹⁹ While that may be an exaggeration, in the judgments of the magistrates in Geneva, Calvin had triumphed, and in 1541 they urged him to return to their city. He did so but with much reluctance, convinced this was his duty.

Although his supporters had gained control of the city government, Calvin knew many citizens despised him, and he frankly confessed, ‘there is no place on earth of which I am more afraid’.²⁰ For the next fifteen years he would struggle to free the Reformed Church from interference by civil officials, even though the rulers had agreed to his terms when they adopted the Ecclesiastical Ordinances to regulate church-state relations. As Chief Pastor Calvin organized a consistory (presbytery) and composed a catechism in Latin and French, a work translated into other tongues. Soon critics complained the Reformer had created a Protestant papacy, and before long doctrinal issues agitated much unrest, thereby assuring Calvin he would never realize his desire ‘to live in private without being known, [since] God has so much turned me around... that he has never let me rest anywhere’.²¹

THEOLOGIAN OF THE HEAD

While John Calvin proved to be an excellent church leader, one Williston Walker called *The Organizer of Reformed Protestantism*,²² his legacy to the church at large is primarily his contributions as a theologian and Bible commentator. He was a profound scholar well equipped to aid others who aspired to serve Christ and his church. Preaching and teaching were his passion, tasks he approached with clear understanding of the obstacles to

¹⁹ Beza, *Life of Calvin*, p. xxxv; see *A Reformation Debate: Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply*, ed. by John C. Olin (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976 reprint of 1966 edition); Richard M. Douglas, *Jacopo Sadoletto, 1477-1547* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), a fine biography.

²⁰ Quoted by Willem Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, tr. by W. J. Heynen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), p. 169.

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms, I*, trans. by James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979 reprint), pp. xl-xli.

²² Williston Walker, *John Calvin: the Organizer of Reformed Protestantism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969 reprint of 1906 edition).

be overcome, if people were to attain to the proper knowledge of God and themselves.²³

In contrast with the optimistic view of human nature popular among Italian Renaissance scholars and artists, Calvin understood the reality of sin and the damage it inflicts upon peoples' minds. He knew, however, that humans are God's image-bearers, even though depraved in every faculty of their being. Sin has impaired, but not destroyed, man's intelligence, and 'some sparkling bits of light keep darting out of the deep... darkness of the human mind'. People, though unregenerate, still possess a measure of rationality, but they cannot acquire the proper knowledge of God and themselves. Instead, they follow their 'depraved imaginations; they only become insane'.²⁴ Although a 'seed of religion', a 'sense of deity', remains within them, the *noetic* effects of sin lead them into superstition rather than to the knowledge of the true God.²⁵ In their corrupt condition people 'have a spontaneous inclination toward vanity and error and will embrace... whatever suits their fancy'.²⁶

The tragic state of human minds notwithstanding, Calvin praised God for restraining evil and imparting beneficial gifts to even the most depraved thinkers.

Glorious gifts of the Spirit [are] spread throughout the whole human race. For the liberal and industrial arts come to us from profane men. Astronomy and the other branches of philosophy [knowledge], medicine, political science—we must admit that we have learned them all from them.²⁷

The Reformer of Geneva recognized the distinction between saving grace and common grace, and he knew only regeneration could overcome the noetic effects of sin, and that is a progress which continues throughout the lives of believers, as they experience the grace of sanctification. Like Martin Luther, he knew justified sinners are sinners still—*simul justus et peccator*. Saints are only partly sanctified so, as Calvin expressed the matter:

Since we carry around with us... the remains of sin, a perfect knowledge of the gospel does not exist in us, it is not strange that no one has rid himself entirely of the unrighteous and stupid desires of his flesh.²⁸

²³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1960), I.i.l.

²⁴ *Calvin: Commentaries*, p. 131.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132; *noetic* is from the Greek term *nous*—the mind.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 280; cf. *Institutes*, II.i.8.

²⁷ *Calvin: Commentaries*, p. 355.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Since Calvin's understanding of total depravity did not imply destruction of the image of God, he called Christians to regard all humans with respect and compassion, however evil they might be. To abuse human beings is to attack God. Even though a believer may view a person as 'contemptible and worthless', he must 'embrace him in love and... perform the duties of love on his behalf'.²⁹

Because of mankind's distorted perception of God, people cannot understand themselves properly. They lack that wisdom which comes from the correct knowledge of God and self. No one can understand himself apart from an adequate knowledge of the God who has revealed himself as Creator and Redeemer. This saving knowledge comes from Scripture alone, and that revelation directs readers to Christ, the only Saviour and Mediator with the Father. The Bible is a Christo-centric book. The Holy Spirit implants faith to receive divine forgiveness and life eternal,³⁰ and 'Scripture will ultimately suffice for a saving knowledge of God only when its certainty is founded upon the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit'.³¹

To reinforce a clear understanding of sin's effect upon human minds, Calvin argued they are in darkness, 'destitute of all wisdom and righteousness'; a condition what leads unbelievers to ridicule the intelligence and learning of Christians. To such critics of the faith

nothing is too silly for us who hope... we shall be given life by a dead man, ask pardon from a man who was condemned, derive the grace of God from a curse, and flee for refuge to a gallows as the one and only hope of eternal salvation.³²

Noetic effects of sin prevent humans from perceiving the reality of God despite the brilliance of his revelation as in the *mirrors* of the physical universe, finite creatures of all sorts, and the image of God within them. Sinful minds ignore these witnesses to the Creator and that of Scripture as well. Even sinners who do not deny God's existence desire to confine him to heaven, so they may live without his interference.³³

The cure for humanity's miserable mental condition requires faith in the 'promises of God which cannot be had without the gospel, for by hearing it and knowing it, living faith is provided, together with a sure hope

²⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, I.i.1-2; III.i.4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, I.viii.13.

³² John Calvin, *Concerning Scandals*, trans. by John W. Fraser (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 20-2.

³³ Calvin, *Institutes* I.v.11-12; a clear, concise study of this matter appears in William F. Keesecker, 'John Calvin's Mirror', *Theology Today*, 17 (1960), 288-89.

and perfect love for God and a lively love toward our neighbor'.³⁴ The gospel is the Word of Christ, and 'all cognition of God apart from Christ is an immense abyss which immediately swallows up our whole mind'.³⁵ Christ as man is the perfect image of God, the demonstration of God's intention for all human beings.³⁶

Calvin's clear grasp of the human condition put him sharply at odds with medieval Scholastics who pursued the study of theology in a speculative manner which led them beyond the bounds of Scripture and therefore into uncertainty and irrelevance to the needs of the Church. The Reformer of Geneva was highly critical of those who promised a synthesis of biblical revelation with Aristotelian philosophy. Rather than rely on pagan teachers, Calvin constructed his systematic theology on Scripture, in which he had complete confidence. His objective was to assist people in apprehending God's self-disclosure in Scripture and supremely in Jesus Christ. So great was his confidence in divine revelation that he exclaimed:

Scripture is the school of the Holy Spirit, in which, as nothing is omitted that is both necessary and useful to know, so nothing is taught but what is expedient to know... [The Christian must] open his mind to every utterance of God directed to him.³⁷

Calvin maintained that Scripture speaks the Word of God as surely as if God himself were to do so orally.³⁸

Humanity's refusal to honour Scripture, Calvin maintained, is evidence of the abnormal condition of human nature since the fall. The Reformer understood sin to entail a corruption that leads man 'to build the world around himself, to corrupt even his best achievements by being conscious that they are *his* achievements'—pride!³⁹ Because of their morally deranged condition, sinners are not able to understand either God or themselves correctly, and hence they do not realize where their own interests lie.

³⁴ Calvin: *Commentaries*, p. 67.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xv.4.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, III.xxi.3.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I.vii.1.

³⁹ John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 29.

THEOLOGIAN OF THE HEART

A critic of the Reformer of Geneva once remarked, 'from an affair of the heart... Calvin transformed religion into an affair of the intellect'.⁴⁰ This is a rather common view among opponents of Calvinism, one which has applied epithets such as 'strict, moralistic, legalistic, authoritarian, rigorous, systematic, biblical theocrat, cold, severe, dictatorial, and austere'.⁴¹ Such defamations of character display far more prejudice than informed judgment, and numerous scholars have supplied effective rebuttals, especially as they have investigated Calvin's correspondence, sermons, and prayers. Even in the *Institutes*, however, the Reformer expressed his passion and compassion as a pastor, as he explained how true faith is not only a cerebral grasp of doctrine but a heart-felt commitment to Christ. Writing about saving faith, Calvin declared:

The Word of God is not received by faith if it flits about in the top of the brain, but when it takes root in the depth of the heart, that it may be an invincible defense to withstand... all the stratagems of temptation.⁴²

Contrary to the depiction of John Calvin as an uncaring logician with a heart of ice and a countenance of stone, his own writings display warm-hearted devotion in response to God's love, as he called Christians to realize the extent of the divine purpose throughout their being, including their emotional lives, for 'when the faithful are convinced... they are loved by God... they are not slightly touched with this conviction, but have their souls thoroughly imbued with it'.⁴³ Calvin indicated he hoped to persuade people Christian doctrine is not a matter of esoteric speculation but truth which elicits heart-felt affection. To achieve this end, he wrote for common people in language they could understand. This is apparent in his many Bible commentaries in which he took care to correct obscure interpretations of Scholastic authors which often left readers confused. Christo-centric exegesis guided his passionate proclamation of salvation for otherwise helpless sinners, of which he knew he was one. Rather than

⁴⁰ Quoted by A. Mitchell Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, 2nd edn (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1950), p. 9.

⁴¹ This is an observation of Randall C. Zachman, 'Theology in the Service of Piety', *Christian Century*, 23 (1997), 419. Zachman himself, however, expressed admiration for Calvin.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.34.

⁴³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to The Romans*, trans. and ed. by John Owen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955 reprint of 1849 edition), p. 194; cf. Eifion Evans, 'John Calvin: Theologian of the Holy Spirit', *Reformation & Revival* 10 (2001), 83-104.

portray God as a distant autocrat, Calvin preached a merciful Father who, through the gospel, invites the lost to himself.⁴⁴

Even when expounding the difficult doctrine of predestination, the Reformer often presented it as a blessed encouragement to troubled Christians, a cause for gratitude and an impetus to love God fervently. Consider this statement:

As [the Christian] justly dreads fortune [chance], so he fearlessly dares commit himself to God. His solace... is to know that his heavenly Father so holds all things in his power, so rules by his authority... so governs by his wisdom, that nothing can befall [him] except he determine it. Moreover, it comforts him to know that he has been received into God's safekeeping, and entrusted to the care of his angels, and that neither water, nor fire, nor iron can harm him, except in so far as it pleases God... to give them occasion.⁴⁵

In even his most thorough doctrinal treatise Calvin called his readers to consider dogmas as inducements to spirituality. 'Piety was the keynote of his character. He was a God-possessed man.'⁴⁶ Rather than deducing conclusions from his assumptions about God and man, Calvin objected to the Catholic Scholastics for that very practice. He emphasized the heart as the seat of faith, which is confidence in God's Word. Intellectual acceptance of divine revelation, though entirely necessary, must be accompanied by a radical change in the condition of the heart. As he said, the assent believers give to God is 'more of the heart than of the brain, and more of the disposition than of the understanding'. He supported this assertion by quoting Romans 20:10: 'with the heart man believes unto righteousness'.⁴⁷

Once the Holy Spirit regenerates a dead heart, the recipient of that grace begins the process of recovery from the noetic effects of sin, and mind and heart together love the Saviour and regard God as both Sovereign and Father, the paternal source of all good things. They serve God because of reverential love.⁴⁸

Although the glory of God was Calvin's foremost emphasis, he always sought the wellbeing of fellow humans. Indeed, he believed extending such care is pleasing to God, a major means of promoting his glory. Convinced the proper knowledge of God and man crushes sinful pride and produces becoming low self-esteem, the Reformer urged Christians to implement

⁴⁴ Zachman, 'Theology in the Service of Piety', has explained this well.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.11.

⁴⁶ Hunter, *Teaching of Calvin*, p. 296.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.ii.8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, I.ii.2; Benjamin B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 139-76.

love for their neighbours, even when that entailed risk to themselves. This was not just a precept he propounded from the pulpit but one he put into practice, thereby setting an example for his people. In 1538, when he learned a nephew of William Farel had contracted bubonic plague, Calvin quickly went to minister to him without regard for probable contagion. When the boy died, Calvin paid the funeral expenses.⁴⁹ During an epidemic of plague in Geneva in 1548, Calvin offered to be chaplain at the city hospital, but municipal officials would not allow him to do so. Upon the death of his friend Guillaume de Frie, the Pastor became guardian for his orphan children.⁵⁰

In addition to his ministry to sick and dying people, John Calvin was a counsellor to troubled souls, a role in which he showed great sympathy and sensitivity to the needs of others. When Madame de Grammont learned her husband had been unfaithful, her Pastor urged her to

pray daily to God that he may change your husband's heart, try to win him back... I know how difficult this is..., since you have been betrayed several times..., but you must still work on it, since it is the best remedy.⁵¹

Persecution of fellow Protestants caused Calvin particular grief, as his letter to Farel on May 4, 1545 attests. Some Waldenses who had not yet embraced the Reformed faith but had attended the teaching of Farel, fell victims to the wrath of French King Francis I, who slaughtered hundreds of them. Frustrated by inability to help these suffering believers, Calvin closed his letter with these words: 'I write worn out with sadness and not without tears, which so burst forth every now and then that they interrupt my words.'⁵² The Reformed Church leaders did send a delegation to Paris which obtained release of some Waldenses. Those so liberated moved to Geneva, there to swell the refugee population.

Concern for oppressed Protestants often led Calvin to send letters of consolation, as when Richard Le Fevre was condemned to die by burning in 1551. The Pastor-Reformer counselled him to prepare for a wed-

⁴⁹ *Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters*, ed. by Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, 7 vols (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983 reprint of 1858 edition), vol. 4, letter of August 20, 1538.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. 7, letter of February 11, 1562.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, letter of October 28, 1559.

⁵² *Ibid.*, vol. 4, letter of May 4, 1545. An interesting account of this episode appears in Chris Accardy, 'Calvin's Ministry to the Waldensians', *Reformation and Revival* 10 (2001), 45-58.

ding feast with Jesus.⁵³ In 1552 Calvin wrote to five missionaries of the Reformed Church sentenced to death in France, assuring them of his prayers and efforts to obtain their release through the intercession of sympathetic people of influence in France. He prayed God would give them cause to rejoice whatever the outcome of their trial.⁵⁴

Calvin's capacity to 'weep with those who weep' (Romans 12:15) is especially evident in the manner by which he responded to the death of his only son and that of his wife Idelette. She was a widow with two children when Calvin married her, after leading her and her late husband to renounce Anabaptism and to embrace the Reformed faith. The Reformer heartily adopted Idelette's children, and together he and she produced a son named Jacques, but he died in infancy. The mother never recovered from a difficult pregnancy and perilous delivery of a premature baby. Even before these tragedies, Calvin learned while away from Geneva that plague threatened the city, a development that caused him much anxiety. In a letter to his fellow reformer Pierre Viret (1511-71), his concern is obvious. He wrote: 'what makes my grief grow even more is that I hear they [his wife and children] are in danger, and there is no way I can help them.'⁵⁵ Calvin cared tenderly for his wife during her final illness, a time when he again wrote to Viret: 'the reason for my sorrow is not an ordinary one. I am deprived of my excellent companion.'⁵⁶

To believers enduring afflictions, Calvin exclaimed: 'all those who regard their troubles as necessary trials for their salvation not only rise above them but turn them into an occasion for joy'.⁵⁷ Confidence in the sovereign providence of God should lead suffering saints to 'consider it as coming from God and as... intended for our good'.⁵⁸ Moreover trials provide opportunities for believers to examine their thoughts and actions to find reasons for divine chastisement.⁵⁹

In addition to his eagerness to console troubled saints, the Pastor-Reformer of Geneva admonished his people not to rejoice over the trials of unbelievers, even though they deserve to suffer. He said 'be sorry for those who are punished, because we may have deserved as much or more',

⁵³ For this information and much more I am indebted to Richard Stauffer and his excellent book *The Humanness of John Calvin*, see p. 90.

⁵⁴ *Selected Works of Calvin*, vol. 5, letter of June 10, 1552.

⁵⁵ Quoted by Stauffer, *Humanness of Calvin*, p. 41.

⁵⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁷ John Calvin, *Suffering—Understanding the Love of God: Selections from the Writings of John Calvin*, compiled and annotated by Joseph A. Hill (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005), p. 30.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vi.6.

a maxim he supported by referring to Hebrews 10:31, 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'.⁶⁰ Rather than denigrating the lost and exulting in self-esteem, Calvin admonished readers of the *Institutes*:

It is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind self-love that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity, that you may learn to distrust yourself... that you may transfer your trust to God... relying upon his help, you may persevere unconquered to the end.⁶¹

The Reformer maintained the proper knowledge of God always produces low self-esteem.⁶²

Although often misrepresented as an austere, unapproachable figure, John Calvin was a warm-hearted pastor, a sensitive person possessed of the whole range of emotions characteristic of all human beings. He formed close friendships, and the loss of friends grieved him deeply. Once, when Theodore Beza lay ill because of plague, Calvin related to a friend in France that he was 'weighed down with a load of grief', and he stated 'I would be destitute of human feeling did I not return the affection of one who loves me with more than a brother's love and reveres me as... a father'.⁶³ To his great relief, Beza recovered and lived to succeed Calvin as chief pastor in Geneva.

Another of Calvin's dearest friends was Phillip Melanchthon (1497-1560), Luther's closest co-worker in Wittenberg. They met at Frankfort in 1539, later at Worms (1540-41) and at Regensburg (1541). Common concerns and mutual affection bonded them together as comrades in the cause of reformation. This relationship continued even after Melanchthon discarded some of Luther's teachings to which Calvin heartily subscribed. The Reformer of Geneva dedicated his work *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will* to his German friend who had not yet deviated from Luther's position on that subject. In 1546 Calvin translated Melanchthon's *Loci Communes* (systematic theology) into French despite his disagreement with some of the Wittenberg scholar's contentions. When Melanchthon died, Calvin sorrowed profoundly.⁶⁴ When the son of his friend M. de Richborug perished because of plague, Calvin wrote to the bereaved father, 'I found myself so distracted and confused in spirit that for several days I could do nothing but cry'.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Suffering: Understanding the Love of God*, p. 41.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.viii.6.

⁶² *Ibid.*, III.iii.16.

⁶³ *Selected Works of Calvin*, vol. 5, letter of June 30, 1551.

⁶⁴ Stauffer, *Humanness of Calvin*, pp. 65-6.

⁶⁵ Quoted by *ibid.*, p. 88.

The John Calvin of legend may appear as a stern person devoid of feelings, but the John Calvin of history was very much the opposite, a scholar who instructed the intellect, yes, but a pastor and friend who counselled and consoled the heart as well.

THEOLOGIAN OF THE HANDS

While Calvin will always be remembered as a profound scholar, the foremost theologian of the Reformation, his contributions to the resurgence of biblical Christianity extend far beyond his academic labours. Never an advocate of learning for its own sake, this reformer sought the application of Christian principles to all of life. As he once declared, 'true religion is founded upon obedience.... God is rightly worshiped only if his Word is obeyed.... Hence the church can be established only where the Word of God rules.'⁶⁶ The authority of the Word then must not be restricted to the realm of the intellect but applied to behaviour in all areas of life. Like Luther and other reformers, Calvin understood there is nothing Christians could do to enhance the life of God, but they have endless opportunities to show their love for him by serving the needs of their neighbours. When Sorbonne theologians extolled love for self as prerequisite to love for one's neighbours, Calvin retorted:

our self-love produces a neglect of and contempt for others.... Therefore our Lord demands that it be converted into [true] love... We must seek our brother's advantage no less than our own.⁶⁷

This obligation extends to everyone, to brethren in the faith, of course, but it includes a responsibility to love even those who hate the people of God. As Calvin put it, 'the best evidence of our adoption is to do good to the wicked and the untrustworthy'.⁶⁸

Within the context of sixteenth century Geneva, Christians had abundant opportunities to put their faith to work in tangible ways. Between 1550 and 1560 the population of the city rose to 21,400, an increase of 60%, and many new arrivals were impoverished refugees fleeing persecution in Catholic lands. In a series of sermons on the book of Job, delivered in 1554, Calvin addressed the need to provide for poor people through charity organized so as to make it efficient, and to that end he stressed the role of deacons as ministers of assistance. Those God has favoured with wealth must aid the poor as an expression of love for their neigh-

⁶⁶ *Calvin: Commentaries*, pp. 78-9.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 327-9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

bours. This was not to impose economic equality but to reduce the sufferings of destitute people. Calvin regarded selfish refusal to aid the poor as theft and willful neglect to obey God's commands. Giving must originate as genuine concern for others. Each person must give according to his means, and no one may stipulate an amount for others. Love for money is idolatry, while self-denial to help others is a consequence of sanctification. Monetary gifts to God and to the needy are acts of worship when offered in a loving spirit.⁶⁹

Calvin very much desired believers to give *hands* to their faith by taking specific measures to help people in need, and the ministries of Geneva's deacons implemented that concern. One prominent example of their labours is the creation of a hospital as specified in the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541. Calvin often appealed to the magistrates to enlarge programs to aid the poor, and he participated personally in collections of funds for charity. Believing Geneva was a Christian community, he favoured cooperation between church and state to relieve the distress of impoverished residents.

His understanding of human depravity kept Calvin from being naïve about poor relief. He knew there were lazy people eager to benefit from the generosity of others, and he expected fraudulent appeals for aid. The Reformer therefore directed the deacons to investigate applicants for assistance before granting them charity. He often railed against laziness, and to combat it, he urged the city to establish industries and so create jobs. Calvin emphasized the dignity of labour and said employers and workers should consider wages as provisions from God. As they do so, both will understand the need for just wages. He believed civil government has a God-given duty to prevent fraud and exploitation in commerce, and to that end he urged price controls to prevent speculation and hoarding goods for sale in times of scarcity.⁷⁰

Calvin explained the duties of the Christian life in connection with his emphasis on self-denial, and that should, he maintained, lead believers to glorify God through seeking the good of their neighbours. Diligent performance of one's common work is a fitting way to do so.⁷¹ Much like

⁶⁹ See Calvin, *Sermons from Job*, ed. and trans. by Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), especially the exposition of Job 31:16-23. For an excellent examination of Calvin's thinking about charity, see André Bieler, *The Social Humanism of Calvin*, tr. by Paul T. Fuhrmann (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964).

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-53. For a perceptive study of Calvin's thinking about economics, see Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 85-96.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.4-10.

Luther, the Chief Pastor in Geneva regarded ordinary work as a divine calling, as God equips and assigns each person a place for his or her work. In the case of the elect, this demonstrates God's care for his people, as their labour promotes their sanctification.⁷² Calvin showed great disdain for the Roman Catholic practice of applying the concept of *calling* to clerics alone.⁷³ He denied one form of labour is higher than another. As he expressed this conviction, 'no task will be said to be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight'.⁷⁴ Farmers, shoemakers, and barbers should regard their work as dignified because God has called them to it. God's bestowal of talents and opportunities to employ them is then not limited to spiritual gifts but extends to all areas of life in manual and mental labour.⁷⁵

Although Calvin emphasized the virtue of self-denial and Christians' responsibility to care for the poor, he did not promote a severely ascetic style of life. He believed the saints should receive God's material gifts gratefully and enjoy food, wine, clothing, even jewellery and precious metals, but they must not covet them or allow the quest for them to control their lives. To Calvin self-denial meant dying to sin and living for Christ. It does not entail ascetic renunciation of the material creation which God has provided for human benefit and enjoyment. Some French nobles, when they fled to Geneva, brought their love of social status with them and disdained work as beneath their dignity. Calvin rebuked them, contending the biblical mandate to work applies to everyone. The attitude of such aristocrats was fundamentally the same as that of monks who regarded themselves as a spiritually superior social class.⁷⁶

In Calvin's view earthly life is a gift from God, so Christians should despise only the sinful aspects of life in this world. Believers are on a pilgrimage to heaven, and they should avail themselves of earth's wholesome pleasures while they travel.⁷⁷

⁷² Ibid., III.x.6.

⁷³ Ibid., IV.xiii.11.

⁷⁴ Ibid., III.x.6.

⁷⁵ *Calvin: Commentaries*, pp. 355-6. A helpful treatment of this matter is by Ian Hart, 'The Teaching of Luther and Calvin about Ordinary Work: 2. John Calvin (1509-64)', *Evangelical Quarterly* 67 (1995), 121-35.

⁷⁶ Alister McGrath, 'Calvin and the Christian Calling', *First Things* 94 (June-July 1999), 31-35; Paul Helm, *The Callings* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), pp. 58-60.

⁷⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: the Gospel According to St. John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), pp. 37-8.

CONCLUSION

Calvin, of course, knew life on earth is temporary, and as he approached his own demise, the Reformer apologized to people he had offended and assured them it was not because of malice but due to zeal for the truth. He maintained his teaching was always scriptural, and he warned that false teachers would soon appear, 'wicked, giddy men, to corrupt the pure doctrine which you have heard from me'.⁷⁸

Among John Calvin's ailments were asthma, tuberculosis, indigestion, ulcerated haemorrhoids, gout, colic, and quartan fever; at times he vomited blood. Beza reported that, when in much pain, his friend exclaimed 'Thou, O Lord, bruist me; but it is enough for me that it is thy hand'.⁷⁹ His soul departed to be with Christ on May 27, 1564. Calvin had 'looked into the mirror of the creation, the Word, and the Word made flesh and beheld the splendor of the invisible God'.⁸⁰

J. I. Packer has provided a fitting appraisal of this often misrepresented and maligned servant of God and mankind.

What kind of man was he? Not the ogre of legend! Calvin the egotistical fanatic, hard and humorless, the doctrinaire misanthrope, the cruel dictator with his arbitrary, uncaring devilish God is a figure of fancy, not of fact.⁸¹

John Calvin sought to assist people in acquiring the proper knowledge of God and of themselves, a knowledge which humans by nature do not desire. When regeneration occurs, however, they come to regard themselves as ignorant selfish sinners who urgently need divine forgiveness. Transformed by grace, they seek God's glory in all of life's experiences, as they submit to the authority of God's Word.⁸² Calvin himself provided the appropriate prayer for such transformed souls in the devotional ejaculation which became his motto: *Cor meum tibi offero Domine, prompte et sincere*, 'My Heart, I Give to Thee, O Lord, Promptly and Sincerely'. With his *heart* John Calvin gave his *head*, to think God's thoughts after him, and his *hands* to serve God's chosen people.

⁷⁸ Quoted by Beza, *Life of Calvin*, p. xci.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. cxv.

⁸⁰ Keesecker, 'Calvin's Mirror', p. 289.

⁸¹ J. I. Packer, 'John Calvin and Reformed Europe', in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church*, ed. by John D. Woodbridge (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), p. 209.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 214.