The Story of John Calvin

“The sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare truth.”

Athanasius

“If anything drove Calvin’s theology and ministry it was his love for the excellence of God and conversely his abhorrence of all forms of idolatry.”

R. C. Sproul

~*~

“My heart I offer as a sacrifice to God, promptly and sincerely.”

John Calvin

~*~

In 2 Samuel 23:8 we read of David’s special mighty men. The church too has always had her mighty men and women, individuals who shaped the theological content, course and conduct of her behavior. One such man was John Calvin.
Unfortunately, many Christians today know very little of the man John Calvin, though not a few have heard about and perhaps even debated Calvinism. Since a dramatic distinction cannot and should not be made between John Calvin and Calvinism, let us seek to understand both the man and his message.

**John Calvin the Man: The Early Years**

Calvin was born in northwestern France on July 10, 1509, twenty-five years after the birth of Martin Luther. His actual name, Jean Cauvin, became “Calvin” years later when as a scholar he adopted the Latin form (Calvinus). His birthplace, Noyon [Ni-yon], located sixty miles north of Paris, was an old and important center of the Roman Catholic Church in northern Europe. A bishop resided there; and the economic, political, and social life of the city revolved largely around the majestic cathedral.
From a middle-class status Calvin’s father, Gerard, after serving the church in various offices including notary public, had risen to become the bishop’s secretary. As a result, young Calvin was closely tied to church affairs from the beginning. He was brought up with children of the aristocracy, a background that made him a much more socially refined reformer than the notoriously earthy Martin Luther.

For example, people would not soon forget Luther saying with zest, "Beer is made by men, wine by God." Luther enjoyed his beer.

And Luther enjoyed animals. "Be thou comforted, little dog; thou too in Resurrection shall have a little golden tail."

To enable his son to advance to a position of ecclesiastical importance, Calvin’s father saw to it that he received the best possible education. At the age of twelve Calvin was made a chaplain and thus able to draw a salary. At the age of fourteen Calvin was enrolled in the University of Paris, the intellectual center of western Europe. There he eventually attended the College de Montaigu, the same institution the eminent Catholic scholar Erasmus had attended (and hated) some thirty years earlier. Although Calvin pursued a similar career in theology, for several reasons his life took an unexpected turn.

First, the new learning of the Renaissance or humanism was waging a successful battle against scholasticism, the old Catholic theology of the late
Middle Ages. Calvin encountered the new learning among the students and was personally attracted to it.

Second, a strong movement for reform in the church, led by Jacques Lefevre d’Etaples (1455–1536), had been flourishing in Paris not far from the university. Calvin became a close friend of some of Lefevre’s disciples.

Third, Luther’s writings and ideas had circulated in Paris for some time, causing a moderate stir. Calvin undoubtedly became familiar with the ideas of the Reformation leader in Germany during his student years.

Finally, Calvin’s father became engaged in a controversy with the church officials in Noyon, including the bishop.

As a result, in 1528, just as Calvin had completed his Master of Arts degree, his father sent word for him to leave theology and study law. Always an obedient son, Calvin moved to Orleans, where France’s best law faculty was located.

As a gifted student, Calvin vigorously pursued his law studies, winning acclaim for his mastery of the material. So diligent was he in the pursuit of knowledge that often the hour of a meal passed without his eating. Long after others were locked in sleep he was still awake. The results were rewarding. Despite his young age, Calvin often taught classes for absent professors.
After about three years of study at Orleans, Bourges, and Paris, Calvin had earned a doctorate in law and was awarded his law license.

In addition to his other studies, Calvin had learned Greek and had immersed himself in the classical studies, which were of great interest to the contemporary humanists. Secretly, he associated closely with a group of students who questioned the teachings and practices of Roman Catholicism.

When his father’s death in 1531 left Calvin free to choose the career he favored, he did not hesitate. Excited and challenged by the new learning, he moved to Paris to pursue a scholarly life. Had he not been converted to Protestantism, he would undoubtedly have lived out his days in Paris as a leading Renaissance scholar.

Little is known about Calvin’s conversion except that it occurred between 1532 and early 1534, when his first religious work was published. Calvin simply referred to the event as his “sudden conversion” but no details have been recorded. Said Calvin, “God, by a sudden conversion, subdued me, and He brought my mind into a teachable frame.”

While in Paris, Calvin befriended Nicholas Cop, an influential figure in the Roman Catholic Church and school. When Nicholas Cop was elected rector of the University of Paris in 1533, his inaugural address on November 1, strongly advocated reform along Lutheran lines. Whether Calvin actually
contributed to the address, as is often supposed, is impossible to prove. His association was close enough, however, that when the rector was accused of heresy by King Francis, they both fled the city. Calvin returned shortly afterward, but only briefly, spending the next three years traveling widely in other parts of France, in Switzerland, and in Italy.

In the spring of 1534 Calvin returned to Noyon to resign his ecclesiastical benefices thereby suspending his regular income the church had granted him which had supported him during his studies. No longer able to draw on that stipend with a clear conscience, Calvin renounced Roman Catholicism permanently with his resignation.

When the French king, Francis I (reigned 1515–1547), decided that persecution was the solution to the Protestant problem, Calvin realized it was no longer safe to live in Paris or anywhere else in France. For the rest of his life, therefore, he was a refugee.

**John Calvin the Writer**

In 1534 Calvin published a work “On the Sleep of the Soul” to protest the teaching of the Ana-Baptist who advocated soul sleep. Calvin denounced the Anabaptist movement as did many of the Reformers.

The year 1536 finds Calvin in Basel (Switzerland) where he published the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. When Calvin learned that
Francis I’s objection to Protestants was on the basis that they rejected all civil authority, as some Anabaptist groups in fact did, Calvin rushed the *Institutes* to press with a dedication and preface to the king, acknowledging the king’s authority and laying out the articles of Reformed faith in clear fashion. The work was destined by God to be one of the most influential handbooks on theology ever written.

Philipp Melanchthon (February 16, 1497 – April 19, 1560), the German co-worker of Martin Luther, became a friend to John Calvin and said, “He is the theologian of the Reformation.”

*The Institutes*, initially intended to be a catechism of six chapters, were eventually to grow into a monumental treatise of eighty chapters in Calvin's final edition of 1559, but even in 1536 they were already the most orderly and systematic popular presentation of doctrine and of the Christian life that the Reformation produced.

B. B. Warfield wrote this, “John Calvin’s *Institutes* must be seen as foundational to the whole development of Western theology.” That is how significant these writings of Calvin are.

In his *Institutes*, the highest human knowledge, Calvin taught, is that of God and of ourselves. Enough comes by nature, through the testimony of the conscience, to leave us without excuse, but adequate saving knowledge is given
only in Scriptures, which the witness of the Spirit in the heart of the believing reader attests as the very voice of God.

These divine oracles teach that God is good and is the source of all goodness everywhere. Obedience to God's will is the main human duty.

As originally created, man was good and capable of obeying God's will, but he has lost power and goodness through Adam's fall, and is now absolutely incapable of goodness. Hence, no human work is meritorious before God, and all persons are in a state of ruin meriting only damnation.

For this helpless and hopeless condition, some are undeservedly rescued through the work of Christ.

Jesus paid the penalty due for the sins of those in whose behalf he died; yet the offer and reception of this satisfaction was a free act on God's part, so that its cause is God's love.

Since all good is of God, and sinners are unable to initiate or resist their conversion, it follows that the reason some are saved and others are lost is the divine choice – God's choice of either election (salvation) or reprobation (punishment).

It is impossible to seek for God's reasoning for his choice beyond the all-determining will of God.
For Calvin, however, election (or "predestination") was never a matter of speculation but always a doctrine of Christian comfort.

If a person wanted to know if he or she was numbered among the elect, there was a simple test. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

Election was not a doctrine to exalt the pride of man but to debase him and cause him to cry out for divine mercy.

That God had a plan of salvation for a person, a single individual, was an unshakable rock of confidence, not only for one convinced of his own unworthiness, but for one surrounded by opposing forces even if they were those of priests and kings. It made the believer a fellow laborer with God in the accomplishment of God's will.

According to Calvin's Institutes, three institutions have been divinely established by which the Christian life is maintained:

the church,

the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper,

and civil government.

In the last analysis, the church consists of "all the elect of God" (4.1.2); but it also properly denotes "the whole body of mankind... who profess to worship one God and Christ" (4.1.7).
Yet there is no true church "where lying and falsehood have gained ascendency" (4.2.1).

The New Testament recognizes as church officers only pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons, who enter on their charges with the assent of the congregation they serve. Calvin thus gave to the congregation a voice in the choice of its officers.

Similarly, Calvin claimed for the church full and independent jurisdiction in discipline up to the point of excommunication which is the separation of an individual from the church.

Further, however, it could not go, and thus further discipline fell to the responsibility of the civil government. Civil government itself has the divinely appointed task of fostering the church, protecting it from false doctrine, and punishing offenders for whose crimes excommunication is insufficient.

Calvin recognized only two sacraments – baptism and the Lord's Supper. Regarding the burning question raised by the earlier Reformers of Christ's presence in the Supper, he stood partway between Luther and Zwingli.

Like Zwingli Calvin denied any physical (bodily) presence of Christ; yet he asserted in the clearest terms a real, though spiritual, presence received by faith. "Christ, out of the substance of his flesh, breathes life into our souls,
indeed, pours forth his own life into us, though the real flesh of Christ does not enter us" (4.17.32).

**John Calvin the Refugee**

The publication of *The Institutes* marked Calvin as a leading mind of Protestantism and kept him from pursuing the quiet scholarly life he had hoped for. As he described it, “God thrust me into the fray.”

Traveling to Strassburg (a free city between northern France and Germany) in 1536, Calvin stopped for one night in Geneva, Switzerland, a small city at the eastern end of the Alps. With the help of its Swiss neighbors, Geneva had recently declared its political independence from the Holy Roman Empire. Only two months earlier under the prodding of fiery reformer William Farel (1489–1565), it had declared allegiance to Protestantism.

Farel, who had been working in Geneva for nearly three years, in the providence of God learned of Calvin’s presence in the city and asked him to join in the task of leading the Genevan church. Calvin, declined, explaining that he desired only to find a quiet refuge for study. But Farel, with characteristic zeal, thundered that Calvin’s refusal to help in Geneva would bring God’s condemnation down upon his head. Said Farel,
“I speak in the name of Almighty God. You make the excuse of your studies. But if you yourself refuse to give yourself with us to this work of the Lord, God will curse you, for you are seeking yourself rather than Christ.”

Later Calvin wrote in the introduction to his Commentary on the Book of Psalms, that he was stricken with terror by Farel’s words, “as if the hand of God from heaven was arresting me.”

Calvin accepted Farel’s invitation as God’s call. He was subject to the Sovereign. He was twenty-eight at the time.

The rest of his life was given mostly to the work of reform in Geneva.

John Calvin the Reformer

Communion Reform

Calvin immediately set to work reorganizing the church and its worship. Under Catholicism the Genevan church had observed Communion only two or three times a year; Calvin, who favored a weekly celebration, recommended a monthly observance as an interim compromise.

Church Discipline

Calvin then emphasized the necessity of personal discipline which, to this time had been the prerogative of the civil government, not only in society, but in the church. Calvin said no. Though the church and civil government are instituted by God they are separate institutions as to function. This ideological
difference between the civil magistrates and Calvin would prove to be contentious in time.

Nevertheless, Calvin’s emphasis on church discipline in particular grew directly out of his high regard for the Lord’s Supper. On one occasion Calvin stood in front of the Lord’s Table and said in essence to those he believed to be unworthy to take the elements, “You will take my life before I serve you.” That is how serious he was. He was willing to lay down his life rather than knowingly allow someone to profane the Lord’s Supper.

To oversee that the sacrament was taken worthily Calvin instituted a church board, the Genevan Consistory [made of Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders], which insured that all communicants or those participating in Communion truly belonged to the “body of Christ” and also were practicing what they professed.

**Congregational Singing**

Calvin also introduced congregational singing into the church—“to incite the people to prayer and to praise God.”
John Calvin in Strassburg

Though he was doing much good, not everyone in Geneva appreciated the Reforms John Calvin was making. Opposition against him grew to the point that Calvin was forced to flee the city. He decided to resume his studies as a classical scholar and moved to Strassburg.

Calvin spent three years (1538–1541) in Strassburg, enjoying his long-sought period of peaceful study. There he associated closely with Martin Bucer (1491–1551), whose ideas, particularly on predestination, the Lord’s Supper, and church organization, markedly influenced Calvin’s own.

John Calvin the Pastor

In Strassburg Calvin also pastored a congregation of Protestant refugees from France, organizing its church government after what he believed to be the New Testament pattern and compiling a liturgy and popular psalm book. He also participated as a representative of Strassburg in the religious colloquies at Worms and Regensberg (both in Germany) between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals (Protestants). He succeeded, in fact, in converting to the Reformed faith at least two Anabaptist observers.
John Calvin the Husband

One of them, Jean Stordeur of Liege, died in 1539, and Calvin, who had been urged by his colleagues to find a wife, married Stordeur’s widow, Idelette de Bure (de Bore). She brought him much consolation and happiness. “During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry,” Calvin wrote at her death ten years later. “Truly mine is no common grief. I have been bereaved of the best friend of my life.” Unfortunately they had no children of their own.

John Calvin the Responder

In the meantime, the Roman Catholic Church, mindful of Calvin and Farel’s expulsion from Geneva, judged that with some diplomatic care the city might be persuaded to return to Catholicism.

Early in 1539 the city council received a letter urging such a move from Cardinal Jacopo Sadoleto, an Italian archbishop with a reputation for favoring moderate reform. The council was at a loss to find anyone in Geneva sufficiently competent to respond to the letter. They forwarded it to Calvin in Strassburg, whose reply to the cardinal still stands as a brilliant explanation and justification of the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther said this apologetic letter “has hands and feet.” In this letter, Calvin made it clear that Reformation was no longer possible within the Roman Catholic Church. There was a need for a complete and final separation.


**John Calvin Returns to Geneva**

Through a remarkable series of coincidences, the four principal Genevan leaders who had secured Calvin’s exile were disgraced—all in unrelated incidents—and in 1541 the city which had driven him out implored him to return. The prospect horrified Calvin, who regarded Geneva as “that cross on which I had to perish daily a thousand times over.”

Nevertheless, at Farel’s renewed insistence, he reluctantly returned. Here he remained until the day of his death.

The city council, now much more responsive to Calvin’s proposals, approved his reforms with few emendations. He began a long, unbroken tenure as Geneva’s principal pastor. Though constantly embroiled in controversy and bitterly opposed by strong political factions, Calvin pursued his tasks of pastoring and reform with determination.

**Social Concerns**

In addition to traditional areas of Christian works, such as arranging for the care of the elderly and poor, many of Calvin’s reforms reached into new areas: foreign affairs, law, economics, trade, and public policy. Calvin exemplified his own emphasis that in a Christian commonwealth every aspect of culture must be brought under Christ’s lordship and treated as an area of Christian stewardship.
Constitutional Concerns

Calvin worked on the recodification of Geneva’s constitution and law, mollifying the severity of many of the city’s statutes and making them more humane.

Commercial Concerns

In addition, he helped negotiate treaties, was largely responsible for establishing the city’s prosperous trade in cloth and velvet, and even proposed sanitary regulations and a sewage system that made Geneva one of the cleanest cities in Europe. Although the legal code, much of it adopted upon Calvin’s recommendations, seems strict by modern standards, nonetheless it was impartially applied to small and great alike and was approved by the majority of Geneva’s citizens.

A Christian Republic

As a result, Geneva became a “Christian republic,” which the Scottish reformer John Knox called “the most perfect school of Christ . . . since the days of the apostles.” Church and state served as “separate but equal” partners.

The foundation on which Calvin based his views of government, both civil and sacred was simple. “Calvin believed that God intended to establish a holy commonwealth on earth, and he worked hard toward that end” (Frank Roberts, Historian). While the civil government and the church government
have different functions, both are subject to the Scriptures and to the Moral Law of God.

**John Calvin the Beloved**

At the outset of his return to Geneva, Calvin confessed his own past impatience and severity and his intention to correct those faults. His openness undoubtedly helped to regain for him the city’s respect and admiration. When he died twenty-three years later, all Geneva turned out to honor him. Calvin’s reputation and esteem always seemed greatest among the population of Protestant refugees who flocked to the city, making Geneva the uncontested center of the Protestant movement. Missionaries fanned out from Geneva to the surrounding countries. The “Reformed Church” thus became the only Protestant group with a universal program.

**John Calvin’s Teaching and Influence on Theology**

The Huguenot scholar Joseph Scaliger in the generation after Calvin described him as “alone among the theologians.” Clearly he was the greatest theologian of his age. Yet he consistently tried to make the Scriptures, as interpreted by the Holy Spirit and experience, the source of his ideas.

“Let us not,”

Calvin admonished,
“take it into our heads either to seek out God anywhere else than in his Sacred Word, or to think anything about him that is not prompted by his Word, or to speak anything that is not taken from that Word.”

**John Calvin and the Sovereignty of God**

In the past some have said that the sovereignty of God was Calvin’s central teaching. Today many Calvin scholars argue that he made no attempt to reduce the biblical message to any one central idea, but rather appreciated and retained the biblical teachings in their complexity, affirming, for example, both human responsibility and God’s sovereign control, as well as other teachings that seem inconsistent when paired.

**Man: The Dwelling Place of God**

Calvin’s system does possess unity. Behind everything that he wrote is the idea suggested earlier by Augustine of Hippo (345–430) that God created human beings for fellowship with himself. Lacking that fellowship, they are miserable and disoriented.

Thus Calvin began his *Institutes* by stressing that all wisdom comes from knowledge of God and of ourselves. The God-man relationship was so basic for Calvin that he argued that in knowing God we learn of ourselves, and vice versa. Knowledge meant much more to Calvin than intellectual exercise.
Rather, theological knowledge requires a moral response by the whole human personality. The whole person, including mind and body, is engaged in the spiritual relationship. The one goal of that “knowing” experience is the worship of God in obedience and gratitude.

**Divine Revelation**

Calvin also emphasized that what we know about God is strictly limited to what God has revealed. He has revealed in Scripture only what is profitable for human beings to know for a covenant relationship with him.

Consequently, Calvin taught that Christians should not engage primarily in theological speculation but in moral edification. Knowledge that does not lead to piety is off course. Calvin followed his own advice in explaining the biblical doctrine of predestination, giving no priority to the rules of logic or philosophic discourse.

The “why” of God’s actions has not been revealed but remains a secret bound up in his inscrutable counsel. The Christian must simply affirm with the Bible that God is intimately connected with the universe and that he “accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11, RSV).

**A Noble Goal**

Calvin hoped that his main contribution would be guidance for the Christian’s spiritual pilgrimage. His theology was intended to be a worship aid.
Yet he was also convinced that the worship of God must properly penetrate every aspect of societal life. To do that effectively the church must commit itself to a maximum use of the gifts God has given it for service in every area of life.

**John Calvin: Education and Government**

In addition to theology, two areas in which Calvin made major contributions are education and church government. The excellence of his own educational training is attested by the fact that his writings have had a lasting effect on the French language. He is considered one of the creators of modern French prose.

**Universal Education**

Perhaps more important, he encouraged the development of universal education. Calvin was convinced that for every person to be adequately equipped to “rightly divide” God’s Word, he or she had to be educated in language and the humanities. To that end he founded an academy for Geneva’s children, believing that all education must be fundamentally religious. The city’s university grew out of the academy, linked to evangelical preaching and offering an education comparable to the finest in Europe.

Some have called the University of Geneva Calvin’s “crowning achievement.”
Government

Calvin’s ideas on government, which have had a powerful effect on political theory in the West, are regarded by other scholars as his greatest contribution.

The representative form of government he developed was organized so that basic decisions are made at the local level, monitored through a system of ascending representative bodies, culminating in a national “general assembly” with final authority.

At each level, power is shared with the laity, not controlled exclusively by the clergy or administrative officials. In emergencies the local church can function without meetings of the upper-level bodies; in the midst of a hostile culture the church cannot be destroyed by silencing the minister.

As a result, the Calvinist church was able to survive, even flourish, under adverse conditions. It experienced severe persecution in Holland under Spanish occupation, in France (except during brief periods of toleration), in England under Queen Mary, in Scotland, in Hungary, and elsewhere.
Lessons to Learn

1. It is important to know church biographies and the heritage of religious ideas, faith and practices.

- Psalms 44:1 We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old.

2. Let us learn what we can from those who have gone before us for they form a cloud of witnesses for our blessing and benefit.

- Hebrews 12:1 Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, 2 Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

3. The life of Calvin reminds us that even good men are but men at best and are full of human frailties. Calvin was a product of his time in many ways reflected in his involvement with Servetus. Care must be taken not to try and justify the evil or injurious behavior that men do but to learn from their weaknesses while emulating their strengths. John Calvin had many strengths including a passion for God, a love for knowledge, a willingness to defend the truth at all personal cost, and the ability to organize and persuade men.

4. Calvin was submissive to his father’s will. That was an important concept for him and formed a core of his theology. Individuals are to be submissive to authority, and in particular, to the living God.

- James 4:7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

5. Though a gifted scholar Calvin believed in the doctrine of common grace. This meant in part he recognized God has given intellectual prowess even to the unconverted. Jesus said the Father sendeth rain “on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). However, for Calvin, the key was that every thought had to come under the authority of Scripture. It alone holds a monopoly on truth.
• 2 Corinthians 10:5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

Personal Application

1. Most professing conservative Christians, generally speaking, are of the Arminian persuasion or the Calvinistic persuasion. Some like to say humorously they are Cal-Arminians.

2. To be a Calvinist is nothing to be ashamed of if one is persuaded by reason and scripture to emphasize the biblical doctrines of predestination, the sovereignty of God, the supreme authority of the Scriptures, and the irresistibility of grace.

Charles Spurgeon said, "There is no soul living who holds more firmly to the doctrines of grace than I do, and if any man asks me whether I am ashamed to be called a Calvinist, I answer—I wish to be called nothing but a Christian; but if you ask me, do I hold the doctrinal views which were held by John Calvin, I reply, I do in the main hold them, and rejoice to avow it." - Charles H. Spurgeon

3. My own counsel is to avoid the term Calvinism as much as possible and wish to be called nothing but a Christian. If someone has a question, let there be an appeal to the Bible for the final answer, not a religious textbook or the opinion of a man.

4. Any life can be made useful when placed fully in the hands of God. And much can be accomplished despite limitations and setbacks. John Calvin lived from 10 July 1509 – 27 May 1564 which means he was only 54 when he died. But as an instrument in the hands of God he changed a large part of the world. Put yourself fully into the hands of God.

5. God will sometimes use intemperate language to accomplish His will. Farel had no idea whether or not God would curse Calvin if he did not stay in Geneva, but he believed it. However, it is the known will of the Lord to be more temperate in our language.
• *Colossians 4:6* Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.

When we preach, let us seek to teach the hearts and conscience of men as well as their head.
Addendum

John Calvin and the Historians

In spite of his powerful influence on European affairs, Calvin has rarely been treated sympathetically by historians. Except among his followers, he has been portrayed as a cold, unfeeling, and calculating man, who imposed his stern will on a helpless or cowed people.

He is seen as the proponent of an austere and joyless religion of fear and constraint, and of a vengeful and arbitrary omnipotent God who treats human beings as puppets, demanding of them servile obedience, yet severely punishing the slightest deviation from his strict moral code.

Such a legalistic and negative religion, popularly attributed to Calvin, is an unfortunate caricature that recent scholarship has only begun to correct. Calvin regarded himself as primarily a pastor and theologian. Spending almost all of his productive years as a refugee and a foreigner in the Genevan republic, he was accorded citizenship only five years before his death, and then only after he appeared to be dying.
Because his opinions were highly regarded, his political views were influential, but he never held political office. His cultural impact was not that of an autocrat, but of a persuasive thinker who sought to apply biblical principles to every area of life.

Far from ruling as a religious despot, Calvin was continually frustrated by the Genevan city council’s unwillingness to implement many of the social reforms he advocated. The city, in fact, was remarkably heterogeneous, by no means unanimously Protestant in partisanship.

Before Calvin arrived, Geneva had the reputation of being one of Europe’s most immoral communities; throughout his career a strong libertine and antinomian faction in the city resisted his reform efforts.

In 1553, at a point in his career when that resistance was at its keenest, events occurring in connection with a certain Michael Servetus seem to have secured for Calvin a permanent bad reputation. Throughout the intellectual centers of Europe, Servetus, a Spanish physician and theologian, was infamous for his anti-Trinitarian polemics.

A Catholic, he had already been condemned by the Catholic Inquisition but had escaped.
When Servetus appeared in Geneva, he was recognized, arrested at Calvin’s instigation, found guilty, and burned at the stake with the unanimous approval of the other Protestant Swiss cities. Despite the fact that religious toleration did not become a popular conviction until at least two hundred years later, and that what was done in Geneva was done virtually everywhere else in Europe on a much grander scale, Calvin’s part in that execution has evidently served to confirm his image as an intolerant authoritarian.

Calvin was never a popular hero, even locally, nor did he act the hero’s customary part. Lacking the charm of Luther’s blustering Germanic confidence and humor, Calvin held an intensely serious view of life.

Sensing a divine call to the work of God’s kingdom, he approached his task with great zeal and expected the same of others. Few light-hearted moments or intimate glimpses of Calvin were recorded. He would not, even momentarily, set aside his deep conviction that, as God’s creation, he was put on earth to glorify God.

He deliberately avoided the limelight and the sensational in order that nothing might detract from the message of God’s grace in Christ. Humility and self-denial were his principal Christian virtues. He lived modestly, had few possessions, lived in borrowed quarters, and stubbornly refused salary increases.
In theology, he was completely awed by the concept that sinful human beings had been “reckoned righteous” in Christ and accounted worthy to serve the incomprehensibly holy and sovereign God of the universe. In contrast to the caricature, then, there is probably more truth to the conviction of the nineteenth-century French historian Joseph Renan (who was no Reformed enthusiast) that Calvin was “the most Christian man of his time.”