

# John Calvin

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     What do you know about John Calvin? For years, all I knew about Calvin was the acronym TULIP, which stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the preservation of the saints, or the perseverance of the saints.

Eventually, I learned that though he certainly taught these doctrines, he did not create that acronym, so as it happened, the one thing I knew about him was wrong. Most people seem to think of Calvin as a theologian, and he most certainly was.

In fact, he was a phenomenal theologian. Perhaps you've heard of Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. It's nearly a thousand pages of some of the richest, deepest, biblical insights you will ever read.

Well, believe it or not, he wrote and published the first edition of that book within only two years of his conversion to Christ. It took me at least that long to figure out where the book of Nahum is in the Bible.

Granted, the first edition of the Institutes was not nearly a thousand pages, but still. Calvin may have aspired to be a theologian at one point, but things quickly changed.

[ 1 : 3 0 ]     First and foremost, John Calvin was a pastor. Today, many pastors would love to be theologians, but Calvin was a theologian, a natural theologian who wanted nothing more than to be a pastor.

It's interesting to compare his sermons with his commentaries on the Bible. In his commentaries, we read thorough, scholarly, in-depth exegesis of the text.

And when we read his sermons on the same passages, it's clear that he's performed the work that went into his commentaries, but his sermons are very simple, very practical.

So he was a theologian when he studied the text to begin with, and then he was a pastor when he preached it. And not every pastor understands that distinction.

Calvin was a proficient writer. He was a loyal friend. But there was nothing more central to his life than the glory of God.

[ 2 : 4 2 ]     First and foremost, the glory of God, which is why he rarely talked about himself. Aside from a few letters to friends and an occasional remark in the prefaces of his commentaries, everything we know about him is secondhand.

And I think if he were here today, I suspect he would object to me talking about him at length. If Calvin were here today, I am certain he would tell me to preach the excellency of Christ.

As he once said, this is the only means of retaining, as well as restoring, pure doctrine. To place Christ before the view, such as he is with all his blessings, that his excellence may be truly perceived.

About a week ago, I was speaking with a fellow Christian about Calvin. I was studying Calvin's life. So I asked him, what do you know about Calvin?

He replied, isn't he the guy who invented predestination? I had to laugh. I just shook my head and said, no, you'll have to praise God for that one.

- [ 4 : 02 ] By the way, I'm fairly certain Augustine and Luther had more to say about predestination than Calvin. But that's what most people think of when they hear the name John Calvin.
- They think of Calvinism, right? And if one disagrees with the tenets of Calvinism, well, John Calvin quickly becomes a polarizing figure. Calvin's protege, Theodore Beza, said of him, in Calvin, all men may see a most beautiful example of the Christian character.
- An example which it is as easy to slander as it is difficult to imitate. Love him or hate him, Calvin is a polarizing figure.
- That was true in Calvin's day and it remains true in our day, which is a shame because even Calvinism's staunchest opponents have many reasons to be thankful for him and for his ministry.
- And I will give you some examples today. First of all, it's a fundamental mistake to think of Calvinism as merely a specific set of doctrines.
- [ 5 : 19 ] Typically, when we think of Calvinism, we think of total depravity, unconditional election, and so on. Calvin certainly believed and taught the doctrines of grace.
- But if we want to truly understand him and his impact on the world, we need to realize that Calvinism encompasses far more than his soteriology. A better way to think about Calvinism is to think of it as John Calvin's worldview.
- What was Calvin's worldview? As I said before, there was nothing, nothing more central to Calvin's life and ministry than the glory of God.
- There was nothing more important. He had no greater message to preach than whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. This central purpose governed everything about him, everything he believed, everything he said, everything he did, everything he taught.
- It is all for the glory of God. According to Calvin, if you want to err in life or theology, all you have to do is elevate man.
- [ 6 : 36 ] The quickest and surest way to go wrong is to put man or self at the center of things. But if you want truth, if you want goodness, if you want prosperity, realize that God is supreme.
- God is sovereign. Realize that God is of infinite worth. Realize that everything was made for his glory. Realize that he made us to reflect his glory by giving him glory.
- Now, I don't know whether Calvin had a favorite Bible verse, but if I had to venture a guess, I think it would be Romans 11.36.
- Paul writes, For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. That one verse entirely captures John Calvin's worldview.
- That one verse is Calvinism in a nutshell. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.
- [ 7 : 51 ] That is the definition of Calvinism. Of course, that's only a summary of Calvinism, so let's consider some of Calvinism's finer points.
- Again, even its staunchest opponents will find reasons to appreciate Calvin's worldview. Most people, including Calvinists, do not realize all of the major contributions he made to this world.
- And to be clear, we can't separate his various contributions from his theology. They all flow from his central belief in the glory of God.
- What did Calvin give to this world? First, I'll mention the Protestant work ethic. The reason we call it the Protestant work ethic is because the biblical teaching of working hard, personal responsibility, had all been lost prior to the Reformation, and specifically, John Calvin.
- In the medieval church, very few people were considered to have a holy calling. Very few people were considered to have a God-ordained vocation.

[ 9 : 13 ] Now, if you were in a position of power or if you were a church leader, then you were considered to have a holy calling and a God-ordained vocation. But if you were a lawyer or a coal miner or a stay-at-home mom, that was another story.

In those positions, you do what you have to do to feed your families and stay alive, but there's nothing special about these roles. Calvin disagreed.

He believed and he taught that whatever role one finds himself in, God has called him into it. Whether you're a king or a priest or a lawyer or a mother or a janitor, that is your holy vocation.

In God's sovereign providence, He has placed you in that position. And just like the king or the priest, whatever you have been called to do, do all for the glory of God.

Work hard as though you are working for the Lord. Be responsible as though you are responsible to God. Be thankful for whatever vocation you have because it is God who called you into it.

[ 10 : 29 ] Now, flowing from Calvin's worldview regarding work was the belief that everyone deserves an education. In those days, higher education, much of what we would now call primary education, was reserved for the elites.

Calvin believed the church and society at large should make every effort to educate as many people as possible, give them the resources to learn math and language and science and the Bible.

You may remember from the biographies of Luther and Tyndale that even the Bible was off limits to the vast majority of people, including some priests. In 1559, Calvin started a university open to the public in Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland, where he was serving the church as pastor.

And the Bible was a core part of the curriculum. Now, 200 years later, a deist, perhaps you've heard of him, by the name of Thomas Jefferson, attempted to buy that university.

Now, what would a deist politician want with a Christian Calvinist university? Well, even as an unbeliever, Jefferson knew the incredibly positive impact that school had on the city of Geneva.

[ 11 : 59 ] from issues of morality to work ethic, Jefferson realized that Calvinism, Calvin's worldview, was a tremendous benefit to society.

And Calvinism poured from that university through its students. Jefferson believed a school like that was needed to strengthen and sustain the newborn American nation.

Believe it or not, a very strong case can be made that John Calvin is the reason the United States of America exists. Now, obviously, work ethic and education alone aren't enough to give him credit for the founding of our country, but let's continue because these are just two issues he believed in and preached.

Third, Calvin taught the biblical merits of a capitalistic free market. And we'd be wrong to think that he just pulled these ideas out of the secular world and put a Christian spin on it.

This is not an example of a pastor getting political. He saw private ownership in the Bible. He saw people exchanging value for value in the Bible.

[ 13 : 16 ] He saw people working and investing for profit in the Bible. And as a result of this economic system, he saw people prospering.

Better yet, he saw people gaining the means to help themselves and help others who were less fortunate. Yes, we have to be careful because the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils, but we also have to keep those biblical warnings regarding wealth in context.

Proverbs says, a slack hand causes poverty, but the hand of the diligent makes rich. Jesus said, sell your possessions and give to the needy.

Well, clearly, one must accumulate possessions before he's able to sell those possessions for the sake of the poor. Consider what Paul tells the Ephesians. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor doing honest work with his own hands so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.

Ephesians 4.28 Today, criticizing and condemning capitalism is in vogue, but history speaks for itself.

[ 14 : 38 ] Now, there will always be impoverished people and there will always be abuses within capitalism, but the free market has done more to help the most people possible than any other economic system.

And John Calvin brought the free market to Geneva through his faithful, diligent teaching of the Bible. It then spread from Geneva to other parts of the Western world, including the American colonies.

Wherever Calvinism was found, the people were relatively prosperous. Wherever Calvinism was missing, communities remained largely impoverished.

Now, to be clear, Calvin wasn't trying to be political. He wasn't a civic revolutionary. He was a pastor. simply teaching the Bible.

But he taught it with such conviction, such boldness, such clarity, that these ideas he pulled from Scripture couldn't be contained.

[ 15 : 49 ] His parishioners were transformed. His students were transformed. The worldviews, all of their worldviews came into line with the will of God.

The Apostle Paul says, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God.

That's what happened to people who heard Calvin preach. That's what happened to people who read what Calvin wrote. Their hearts and their minds were conforming to the will of God and a natural consequence was the reformation of society itself.

John Calvin, he also gifted the Western world with a strong sense of justice.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Not only should justice be sought, but it should always be fair. The punishment should always fit the crime. It's not an eye for a tooth or a tooth for an eye, it's eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

[ 16 : 56 ] tooth. So on one side of the coin, Calvin believed a society cannot exist without law and order. He believed law and order, furthermore, must be grounded in God's law.

In other words, we can't merely agree upon some arbitrary rules that we all follow. God's law must be our guide because it shows us God's intentions.

It shows us God's design for His creation. So it would be unnatural for a society to follow any set of laws that aren't drawn from the Creator's laws.

And on the other side of the coin, discipline is a must. Justice is a must. It's not enough to have laws. We must enforce the laws.

We see this even in the Gospel. Even in the Gospel, we see that God was not willing to forgive His people by merely overlooking their sins.

[ 18 : 02 ] He poured out His wrath against sin on His own Son so He could forgive us without perverting justice.

And if God is just, then we should be just because our aim is to what? Glorify Him. Calvin also brought discipline back into the church.

While the medieval church was more than willing to punish people that deemed heretics, as we've seen, it also turned a blind eye to unrepentant sinners in the pews.

Paul tells the Corinthians, Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump as you really are unleavened.

For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

[ 19 : 11 ] Paul continues, Do not associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler.

Not even to eat with such a one. Purge the evil person from among you. Now, church discipline is never a pleasant matter.

But Paul says, Deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. Today, church discipline is rarely practiced.

You know, many churches like to advertise that they love all sinners and they should. But you know, the least loving thing we can do is let people continue living in unrepentant sin without warning them, without correcting them, without disciplining them when necessary.

In our contemporary culture, this lack of discipline has spilled over into a lot of other areas of life, such as parenting. And the consequences are devastating.

[ 20 : 29 ] Well, going back to the matter of God's law, Calvin believed society could only flourish when governed and guided by God's law.

Primarily, the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, the moral law. He believed we need God's moral law to understand the very nature of God, our Creator.

we need it to understand righteousness. We need it to understand ourselves. We need it to understand sin. And if we abandon His law, society descends into a hellish chaos and depravity.

In his commentary on Romans 1, Calvin writes, they indeed deserve to be blinded so as to forget themselves and not to see anything befitting them, who through their own malignity closed their eyes against the light offered them by God that they might not behold His glory.

In short, they who were not ashamed to extinguish as much as they could the glory of God, which alone gives us light, deserve to become blind at noonday.

[ 21 : 46 ] When a community of people disregards God and His glory, God often gives them over to their sin as a just punishment for their stubborn rebellion and society collapses.

What then is the answer? How does the unbelieving world come to embrace the glory of God and His law? Calvin says it begins in the church.

It begins in the church. If the church has neglected the glory of God or if the church fails to preach righteousness and discipline ourselves, what chance does the community around us have?

If the salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under the foot of man.

In the stories of Athanasius, Augustine, Martin Luther, and William Tyndale, we have seen the power of God's word throughout church history.

[ 23 : 00 ] Calvin's story is really no different. Like Luther and Tyndale before him, he believed in the authority of Scripture. According to him, if you want to hear God speak, the Bible is our means.

he said, since no daily responses are given from heaven and the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance, the full authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized unless they are believed to have come from heaven as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.

quite literally, Calvin put the Bible at the center of the church. Medieval tradition not only elevated reason and philosophy and church leaders above Scripture as authorities over the church, but it also relegated the Bible to a lesser place of prominence in the sanctuary.

sanctuary. In Calvin's day, the pulpit sat off to the side while the table for the Lord's Supper was right in the middle. Well, Calvin, he moved that pulpit back to the middle and there sitting right in the center of the church would be an open Bible, the focal point of the entire building.

when one walked into Calvin's sanctuary or any of the sanctuaries influenced by Calvin, the first thing they'd see right there, open Bible.

[ 24 : 43 ] He would be reminded of what the Baptist confession would later state. The Holy Scriptures are the only sufficient, certain, and infallible standard of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.

The whole counsel of God concerning everything essential for his own glory and man's salvation, faith, and life is either explicitly stated or by necessary inference contained in the Holy Scriptures.

The Supreme Judge for deciding all religious controversies and for evaluating all decrees of counsels, opinions of ancient writers, human teachings, and individual interpretations, and in whose judgment we are to rest is nothing but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit.

In this Scripture, our faith finds its final word. just as Calvin's worldview can be summarized by Romans 11:36, for from him and through him and in him are all things, to him be glory forever, his entire preaching ministry can be summarized by 2 Timothy 3:16.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training and righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

[ 26 : 18 ] Belief in the authority of Scripture is a crucial part of Calvinism. It's one thing to believe the Bible. Most any Christian claims to believe the Bible, right?

It's quite another to depend upon it as though it were our sustenance for living. You may remember when God gave his prophet Ezekiel his very words to eat.

Remember that? He said, son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll. Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll. Fill your stomach with it.

Ezekiel then said, I ate it and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. Occasionally, someone will ask me, what's a Calvinist?

What's a Calvinist? And naturally, what I want to do is explain the doctrinal distinctions. I want to talk about total depravity and unconditional election and so on, but I believe there's an underlying fundamental cultural distinction underpinning all other distinctions Christians and it is the Calvinist view of scripture.

[ 27 : 36 ] We don't merely place our pulpits front and center in the sanctuary. Today, almost everyone does that, thanks to Calvin. But we also keep the Bible front and center in all things.

Calvin gave birth to a culture where every last person in the church was thoroughly saturated by the word of God. Tyndale, he wanted the plowboy to read scripture.

Calvin wanted the plowboy to understand it. So from the pulpit and from his writings, Calvin expounded the text in great detail. He gave careful attention to the context of each verse.

He presented the great truths of the Bible in a very systematic way. So even the simple plowboy could wrap his mind around them. Scripture and theology were no longer reserved for the elites.

They were for everyone. So in turn, the lay member in the pew, he learned to read and study the Bible for himself. Suddenly, the average person could discuss theology right alongside the elders in the church.

[ 28 : 49 ] The entire congregation was finally equipped to evangelize the world around them. something that wasn't done for many years. Fathers, they became spiritual shepherds of their families.

Employees and employers, they took biblical principles back into the workplace. That's Calvinism. Calvinism is not merely tulip.

Calvinism is a worldview informed and shaped by Scripture thoroughly. It's a mission to let the Word of God define all things.

It is a culture that is thoroughly immersed in the Bible for the glory of God. By the way, when Calvin replaced the table for the Lord's Supper with the pulpit, that's not to say he abandoned or diminished the importance of the Lord's Supper.

But you see, he realized that we cannot appreciate the value of communion until we fully understand it. and we can't fully understand it, or the gospel from which it comes until we have spent some time studying Scripture and seeing what the Bible tells us.

[ 30 : 09 ] Now, another important reform that Calvin brought to the church was a plurality of elders. elders. In Scripture, he did not see a one pastor or a one priest model for the local church.

The pattern in the New Testament is always multiple elders shepherding the flock together. Despite medieval tradition and the current practices of the Catholic church, Calvin, he pushed against the status quo.

He saw wisdom in the church's leadership having accountability to one another, not to mention benefiting mutually from one another's unique gifts.

Calvin also knew the dangers of putting too much power into the hands of one man. And he believed that was true whether we're talking about church leadership or civil government.

Calvin preached a series of sermons on 1 Samuel 8. That's where we read about Israel demanding their first king. If you remember, Samuel tried to warn them that a king would abuse his power.

[ 31 : 26 ] He would take advantage of them. They would lose their individual rights, but they refused to listen. They said, no, but we will have a king over us. That we may be like all nations.

In those sermons, the biblically grounded, forward-thinking John Calvin introduced and articulated ideas about limited government, a balance of power, individual rights, democratic elections, and a separation of church and state where the state has no authority over the beliefs and practices of the church.

Does any of that sound familiar to you? Geneva became a grand experiment in these very ideas as Calvinism slowly but surely influenced the city outside of the church.

And these ideas were then exported to other parts of the western world primarily through two means, Calvin's university and the Geneva Bible. The city of Geneva was a place of refuge for many persecuted, reformed Christians from other nations.

These refugees, they flooded into what became known as Calvin's school of death. school of death. It was called the school of death because pastors and lay members alike would become persuaded there by Calvinism.

[ 33 : 06 ] They would be transformed by Calvin's unapologetic boldness. And then they were motivated to return to their home countries rather than remain in the safety of Geneva.

And taking Calvinism with them, they returned to the darkness of France and England and other places to be the light of the world. And many of them were martyred. As for the Geneva Bible, Calvin wasn't responsible for translating it, but he did write the footnotes.

And those footnotes communicated his worldview. And for at least a hundred years, the Geneva Bible was the most popular English Bible.

In fact, the King James Version came into existence because of the Geneva Bible. King James didn't like what Calvin had to say about limited government.

He didn't like that Calvin persuaded people to give their allegiance to the King of Kings over and above any human king. So he commissioned a new translation of the Bible to replace the Geneva Bible.

[ 34 : 20 ] even so, Calvinism spread. Nearly a hundred years after Calvin's death, Oliver Cromwell essentially led a political reform that gave birth to the Republican Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland.

And that constitutional republic paved the way for the American Constitution and Republican form of government. I should also mention that the first pilgrims across the Atlantic were carrying with them none other than Geneva Bibles.

As I said before, a strong case can be made that John Calvin is the reason the United States of America exists as we know it today. Furthermore, Calvin and his worldview, I think, are the reasons for the nation's success.

we often acknowledge that this country was founded upon Judeo-Christian principles, but I think if we want to be more specific, this country was founded on Calvinism, work ethic, education, the free market, law and order, justice, a standard of morality and righteousness, discipline, a separation of power, in both church and government, individual rights, religious freedom, can you think of any other set of ideas that has shaped the world as we know it more than Calvinism?

But let's not forget from where Calvinism comes. It grows out of the Bible. Both figuratively and literally, it wasn't until an open Bible was placed at the center of the church that these ideas emerged and began transforming the world.

[ 36 : 19 ] We also do not want to forget what lies at the heart of Calvinism. For from God and through God and to God are all things to Him be glory forever.

Therefore, whatever we do, we do all for the glory of God. from our theology to our politics to our behavior in the home or the workplace, everything we believe and do should be governed by this guiding principle, do all to the glory of God.

This is what John Calvin gave us. He may be a polarizing figure even among Protestant Christians, but as I said before, we all have reasons to be thankful for Him.

Now, I haven't said much about Calvin's theology, which may seem strange, since his theology is the first thing most people think of when they hear the name John Calvin.

And I haven't said much about it for two reasons. First, I want you to understand that Calvinism is even more than the doctrines of grace. It is the doctrines of grace, but it's also more than the doctrines of grace.

[ 37 : 36 ] Second, I want us to understand that Calvin's worldview cannot be separated from his understanding of God's sovereignty in salvation.



It's not a coincidence that Calvin made the various reforms I've mentioned and was also a Calvinist in his soteriology. From Calvin's reliance on Scripture to his views on government, you will find his wholehearted belief in God's sovereignty.

In every word he wrote, everything he spoke. For example, in his commentary on the book of Colossians, Calvin writes, all things were created by him and for him.

He places angels in subjection to Christ that they may not obscure his glory for four reasons. In the first place, because they were created by him.

Secondly, because their creation ought to be viewed as having a relation to him as their legitimate end. Thirdly, because he himself existed always prior to their creation.

[ 38 : 52 ] fourthly, because he sustains them by his power and upholds them in their condition. At the same time, he does not affirm this merely to angels, but also to the whole world.

Thus, he places the Son of God in the highest seat of honor that he may have the preeminence over angels as well as men and may bring under control all creatures in heaven and in earth.

not only is man's highest purpose to glorify God, but God himself works to that end.

He is God. He will be glorified. One day, every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess to God. And he can accomplish this purpose because he is God.

He is sovereign. All things were created through him and for him. When we recognize God's sovereignty as Calvin did, we naturally elevate his supremacy in our minds, don't we?

[ 40 : 06 ] And simultaneously, we feel that much smaller. We are humbled to better see our sinfulness and our utter dependency upon Christ.

We are all the more inclined to not lean on our own understanding, but to lean on God for all things. We look to Scripture to know God's will.

And as we look to Scripture, what happens? All of Calvin's teachings and reforms begin to emerge and change us.

In short, we can't thank God for Calvin's influence on the world while scoffing at his theology. His worldview and his theology are inseparable.

Now, perhaps we'll come back to John Calvin next time and discuss his life and his theology in more detail. We'll see. For now, allow me to recommend a couple of books for further study.

[ 41 : 09 ] Now, many will suggest that you jump right into Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. And that is most certainly on my list. But I want to encourage you, if you want to read Calvin, start with his commentaries on the Bible.

Choose a book of the Bible, get Calvin's commentary, and read through it. You know, if you want to leave aside that daily devotional book you intended to use next year, just instead spend a little time each day reading through Calvin's commentaries.

If you want a further suggestion, start with John's Gospel. Start there. Just read through it. Meditate on what he writes. They offer a lot of food for the soul.

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