Calvin, Jean, 1509-1564

Definition: Calvin, John from Philip's Encyclopedia

French theologian of the Reformation. He prepared for a career in the Roman Catholic Church but turned to the study of classics. In c.1533 he became a Protestant and began work on his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In this work he presented the basics of what came to be known as Calvinism. To avoid persecution, he went to live in Geneva, Switzerland (1536), where he advanced the Reformation.

Summary Article: Calvin, John
From The Columbia Encyclopedia


**Early Life**

Calvin early prepared for an ecclesiastical career; from 1523 to 1528 he studied in Paris. His opinions gradually turned to disagreement with the Roman position, and a demonstrated ability at disputation led him in 1528, at his father's instance, to study law at Orléans and Bourges. After his father's death in 1531 he returned to Paris, where he pursued his own predilection, the study of the classics and Hebrew. He came under the humanist influence and became interested in the growing rebellion against conservative theology. He experienced c.1533 what he later described as a "sudden conversion," and he turned all his attention to the cause of the Reformation.

**Protestant Reformer**

*Institutes of the Christian Religion*

As a persecuted Protestant, Calvin found it necessary to travel from place to place, and at Angoulême in 1534 he began the work of systematizing Protestant thought in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, considered one of the most influential theological works of all time. Completed at Basel in 1536 and later frequently revised and supplemented, the original work contained the basic Calvinist theology. In the *Institutes* Calvin diverged from Catholic doctrine in the rejection of papal authority and in acceptance of justification by faith alone, but many of his other positions, including the fundamental doctrine of predestination, had been foreshadowed by Catholic reformers and by the Protestant thought of Martin Luther and Martin Bucer.

**Work in Geneva**

In 1536, Calvin was persuaded by Guillaume Farel to devote himself to the work of the Reformation at Geneva, and there Calvin instituted the most thoroughgoing development of his doctrine. At first the Genevans were unable to accept the austere reforms and departures from established church customs, and in 1538 the opposition succeeded in banishing Farel and Calvin from the city. Calvin went to Basel and then to Strasbourg, where he spent three fruitful years preaching and writing.

By 1541 the Genevans welcomed Calvin, and he immediately set himself to the task of constructing a government based on the subordination of the state to the church. Once the Bible is accepted as the sole source of God's law, the duty of humans is to interpret it and preserve the orderly world that God has ordained. This goal Calvin set out to achieve through the establishment of ecclesiastical discipline, in which the magistrates had the task of enforcing the religious teachings of the church as set forth by...
the synod. The Genevan laws and constitution were recodified; regulation of conduct was extended to all areas of life. Ecclesiastical discipline was supplemented by a systematized theology, with the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper given to unite believers in the fellowship of Jesus.

**Involvement in Controversies**

Calvin wrote extensively on all theological and practical matters. He was involved in many controversies. Among them were his violent opposition to the Anabaptists; his disagreement with the Lutherans over the Lord’s Supper, which resulted in the separation of the Evangelical Church into Lutheran and Reformed; and his condemnation of the anti-Trinitarian views of Michael Servetus, which ended in the notorious trial and burning of Servetus in 1553.

**Importance of Calvinism**

The extension of Calvinism to all spheres of human activity was extremely important to a world emerging from an agrarian, medieval economy into a commercial, industrial era. Unlike Luther, who desired a return to primitive simplicity, Calvin accepted the newborn capitalism and encouraged trade and production, at the same time opposing the abuses of exploitation and self-indulgence. Industrialization was stimulated by the concepts of thrift, industry, sobriety, and responsibility that Calvin preached as essential to the achievement of the reign of God on earth. The influence of Calvinism spread throughout the entire Western world, realizing its purest forms through the work of John Knox in Scotland and through the clergymen and laymen of the civil war period in England and the Puritan moralists in New England.

**Bibliography**

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