

The Legacy of John Calvin

BY KARIN MAAG



Try the following experiment: Ask people you know for their thoughts about John Calvin. You may get a blank stare in response. Of course, a Calvin College alum, particularly anyone who was part of Chaplain Cooper's reading groups on the *Institutes*, may provide a knowledgeable and well-rounded response. But for many people, the name conjures up mainly negative images of a cold and severe man who got little enjoyment out of

life and made sure that no one else did either. Even in his own time, Calvin came in for a great deal of criticism, even from the citizens of Geneva, his home base. Some called him "the Pope of Geneva"—and that was no compliment.

The problem is that these negative perceptions tell only part of the story. By emphasizing the negative points and downplaying anything else, Calvin's detractors turn him into a one-dimensional, sour-natured caricature. On the opposite end of the spectrum, others claim that Calvin almost single-handedly—or so it seems—brought Geneva to Protestantism, and through his outstanding study of the scriptures and insightful theology (as expressed primarily in the *Institutes*) brought Reformed Protestantism into being and caused it to spread worldwide. In its own way, this very positive reading of Calvin and his influence also distorts the historical record: By minimizing problems and virtually erasing the contributions of Calvin's colleagues and fellow Reformers, such an account turns Calvin into a near-legendary figure.

As we mark Calvin's 500th birthday in 2009, it is worth reassessing our understanding of Calvin and his legacy by considering the historical record more closely. First, Calvin (who was born and brought up in France) only came to Geneva in August 1536, after that city had already formally accepted the Reformation and had simultaneously declared itself politically independent from the duchy of Savoy. So Calvin did not bring the Reformation to Geneva; others had carried out that task. In fact, one of the reasons why Calvin faced so many challenges in Geneva may precisely be because he had the harder task of making the Reformation take root in the inhabitants' lives, moving them from "I voted for Protestantism so we could get rid of the domination of Catholic Savoy" to "I now understand what it means to live as a Reformed Christian."

In order to help the Reformation take root, Calvin and his fellow pastors (about a dozen in total) instituted changes in worship, from

the Latin Mass to the vernacular sermon and from near-daily celebrations of the Eucharist to quarterly celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Genevans were meant to learn the basics of their faith through studying Calvin's catechism (1541–1542) and to reflect their commitment to the Reformed faith in daily living, overseen by the Genevan Consistory. Not surprisingly, many Genevans, especially members of leading families, found these measures intrusive. It seems the most important families in Geneva were quite happy for the lower orders to be answerable to the Consistory for their behavior, but did not anticipate that the Consistory's discipline would apply to them as well!

The larger problem facing Calvin, and all early modern church leaders, was how to deal with people who opposed officially taught and approved beliefs. The case of Michael Servetus, who was executed in Geneva in 1553 for denying the doctrine of the Trinity, has consistently led to criticisms of Calvin, who was the leading pastor of Geneva at the time. Our 21st century mindset

is attuned primarily to individual rights and freedoms (especially our own) and only secondarily and often reluctantly considers the impact of our actions on the community. In the 16th century, two key factors made it difficult for church leaders to make space for competing theological viewpoints. The first was a strong sense that faith was lived out in community: Wrong belief of one individual could in some way affect the beliefs of others and (a very common concept in early modern and indeed biblical thought) could trigger God's wrath against the community. The second factor was a robust understanding that there was only one truth; early modern theologians were not postmodern thinkers, where each person has his or her own valid understanding of what is

true. These factors together made it likely that Servetus would be condemned almost anywhere in Europe—by Catholics as much as by Protestants. Thus to blame Calvin for Servetus' execution is to condemn the entire early modern worldview, a valid point, but one that says more about our own worldview than anything else.

So why commemorate Calvin? What should we remember? His work and that of his fellow pastors in Geneva over many decades did transform the city, and his reputation was such that students and future pastors came from across Europe to learn from him. Many of his writings continue to be influential. Yet he and his colleagues did make mistakes: in their commitment to implementing their vision of a truly Reformed community, they sometimes put their emphasis on the community at the expense of individuals. In the final analysis, John Calvin was human, no more, no less. ✠

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