

Calvin the Theologian

Churchman 073/3 1959

J. I. Packer

John Calvin's theology arrests attention at the outset on two accounts: it has been extraordinarily influential, and it has been extraordinarily maligned.

For the first: it would hardly be too much to say that for the latter part of his lifetime and a century after his death John Calvin was the most influential man in the world, in the sense that his ideas were making more history than those of anyone else during that period. Calvin's theology produced the Puritans in England, the Huguenots in France, the "Beggars" in Holland, the Covenanters in Scotland, and the Pilgrim Fathers of New England, and was more or less directly responsible for the Scottish uprising, the revolt of the Netherlands, the French wars of religion, and the English Civil War. Also, it was Calvin's doctrine of the state as a servant of God that established the ideal of constitutional representative government and led to the explicit acknowledgment of the rights and liberties of subjects, and in due course to toleration—though, admittedly, Calvin and his first followers failed to see that toleration was logically demanded by their principles.¹ These facts reveal Calvin as in effect the producer, not merely of Protestantism in its most virile and thoroughgoing form, but of some of the most fundamental ingredients in post-Renaissance Western civilization. It is doubtful whether any other theologian has ever played so significant a part in world history.

As for the second: it is really staggering to observe how persistently, from his day to ours, Calvin and his teaching have been misrepresented and traduced. The common idea of Calvin is still of an irritable misanthrope who projected his dislike of the human race into a malevolent theology of which the main point was that most men are irremediably damned. It is still widely fancied that the main feature of his thought was predestinarian speculation—as if his theology was ever other than aggressively biblical, or as if he ever asserted anything about predestination for which he did not offer proof from Scripture and precedents from Augustine! His doctrine of sin (later called "total depravity") is still often taken to mean that every man is now as bad as he can be, despite his explicit teaching that common grace, operating through conscience, law, and civil government, constantly restrains the full outworking of human corruption, and moves ungodly men to social and cultural enterprises of abiding worth. Or again, Calvin's faith in divine sovereignty is repeatedly equated with physical or metaphysical determinism (with which it has nothing at all to do), and on the ethical level with sheer fatalism—as if Calvin had never laboured to show that each man is responsible to God for his own choices, and that God works out His purposes through intelligent action on man's part.

Calvin's theology is further supposed to be inimical to evangelism, and to narrow the bounds of God's mercy—as if Calvin had never stressed that Christ is freely offered in the gospel promises to all who will receive Him, nor spent thirty years of his life writing books, advising leaders, training clergy, and equipping layfolk to spread the gospel throughout all Europe. He is pictured as a theological iconoclast, sweeping away the rich legacy of post-apostolic Christian thought as so much useless lumber, when in fact he drank as deeply of the Fathers as any man of his day, Cranmer and Jewel not excepted, and in many matters consciously trod in the steps of Augustine and his medieval disciple Bernard. He is described as a chilly

intellectualist, whereas in fact there is no theologian whose interest is more practical and religious, or whose writings breathe more of the spirit of awe and adoration in the realized presence of almighty God. And then, on the other side, Calvin is repeatedly wounded in the house of his friends by being invoked as patron for views only obliquely related to his own—such as, for instance, the hyper-Calvinism classically expressed in old Mr. Ryland’s famous shout from the chair when William Carey mooted a missionary society: “Sit down, young man; when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine.” Calvin, who himself sent out the first Protestant foreign missionaries in history to an island off Brazil, would not have approved of that! Or again, in recent years, Karl Barth and some of his followers have hailed Calvin as pioneer of their own Christological method in dogmatics—a method which it is tolerably clear that Calvin never had in view, and would have criticized energetically. And so it goes on. A mass of misrepresentation has to be cleared away before we can see the real Calvin and appreciate him for what he actually was.

A third striking fact about Calvin’s theology may also be mentioned here: that is, its consistency. Here, again, we meet a most extraordinary phenomenon. Calvin’s first theological work (*Psychopanychia*, a refutation of the Anabaptist doctrine of soul-sleep) was written in 1534, and his second, the original (1536) *Institutes*, a small volume of six chapters, was completed the next year, when its author was twenty-five. Before his death in 1564, Calvin expanded the *Institutes* through seven revisions into a volume of eighty chapters, five times its original length; produced commentaries or preached expository sermons on all the major books of the Bible;² and wrote a large series of controversial tracts on all the main doctrines of the faith against Romanists, Lutherans, Anabaptists, and assorted individual eccentrics. This thirty years’ work fills nearly forty volumes of the *Corpus Reformatorum*. Yet the only modification in Calvin’s published views, first to last, that seems to have been discovered so far is that in *Psychopanychia* and the 1536 *Institutes* he ascribed the apocryphal book of Baruch to Baruch, whereas he was inclined later to think it pseudonymous.³ Apart from this single detail of criticism, his views never altered at all. “Though he is of the number of those who grow old learning every day,” wrote Beza towards the end of Calvin’s life, “from the very beginning up to the present, in all his many toilsome writings, he has never set before the church one dogma about which he has needed to change his mind and part company with himself.”⁴ Unlike Luther and Melancthon, his older contemporaries, and Augustine before him and Karl Barth after him, his outlook was fully formed by his mid-twenties, when his theological career began, and, though he was able to amplify and improve his early work as his grasp of things increased, he never found cause to correct or retract anything that he had said or written. By any standards, this is a remarkable achievement. There is hardly a parallel among creative theologians, save, perhaps, on a smaller scale, Athanasius.

* * * *

What account, now, should be given of Calvin’s much-maligned theology, which has in the past exerted so powerful an influence on Protestant Christendom (and, we may add, remains one of the strongest influences moulding Protestant thought today)? What were Calvin’s aims and qualifications as a theologian, and what was the extent of his achievement? To find the answer to these questions, we shall not need to look further than the 1559 *Institutes*, the definitive edition of Calvin’s *magnum opus*, at once confession of faith, Protestant apologia, Christian vade-mecum, Reformation manifesto, and theological text-book—by common consent the finest theological work of the Reformation, if not of all time. Its full title includes the statement that its contents, greatly augmented, had been rearranged for this edition into

four books and eighty chapters “according to the most appropriate method” (*ad aptissimam methodum*), so that the layout of the book will itself provide a clue to Calvin’s purpose and to his view of the right relations between the various subjects discussed.

The *Institutes* introduces itself in the opening chapters of Book I as a treatise on the knowledge of God. As such, it may be described from two points of view, corresponding to the traditional distinction between the formal and material principles of the Reformation (that is, the principle of biblical authority and the doctrine of justification by faith only—*sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*). Formally, it is an analysis of the entire theological content of the Bible, from which, as the Word of God, our knowledge of God must derive and on which it necessarily depends. God is the ultimate subject, as He is the ultimate author of all Scripture, and if we would know Him it is to Scripture that we must go; for it is through His inspired witness to Himself in Holy Writ that God makes Himself known to us today. Accordingly, Calvin’s eighty chapters constitute a thorough systematic analysis of all that Scripture discloses of the will and ways of God, and may be read, from this standpoint, as an extended answer to the questions: how can men know God? and what is included in a true knowledge of Him? But this is not all that they are. Just because, formally, the *Institutes* is an ordered exposition of the biblical revelation, it is also, materially, a theology of the gospel and a handbook of evangelical religion; for that is what the Bible, viewed from the standpoint of its contents, is itself. Inspection shows, first, that the hub of the Bible is the gospel, the New Testament *kerygma*, in which the Creator reveals Himself to sinners as Saviour through the work of Christ and the gift of the Spirit; and, second, that Scripture presents this redemptive revelation in a practical way for a practical purpose—namely, to restore ungodly men, through faith in Christ, to a life of obedience and love towards God, in which true religion consists. Calvin, as a faithful expositor, presents the biblical material from the biblical angle of approach. Accordingly, his *summa theologica* is of set purpose, as its title proclaims, a handbook of religion.⁵ From the material standpoint, we may describe it as a theological and practical exposition of the Gospel of Christ on the broadest possible scale, designed as an answer to the questions which were ever before the apostolic theologians themselves: what is man, and how does God regard him? what is true religion, and how do sinners get it? what is Christian faith, and what does it mean to live the Christian life?

One reason why the *Institutes* is at once so rich in matter and so complex in texture is that Calvin writes with both these complementary sets of questions in view all the time; and this, in fact, is one of the most profoundly biblical features of his book. Calvin, we may say, had to write in this way if he was to expound the biblical account of the knowledge of God biblically. For the biblical account of this subject is itself an answer to both sets of questions at once. When Scripture speaks of knowing God, the idea includes both receiving His revelation, which dispels our ignorance of Him, and entering into His fellowship, which brings to an end our alienation from Him. To know God is to possess the double blessing of light and of life. Sinners have a double need: sin has both blinded them to God and estranged them from Him. But the New Testament proclaims the Gospel as a double cure. This it does by a double stress in the exposition of the gospel: John, for instance, emphasizes most strongly that, as a *revelation of reconciliation*, the gospel brings *peace*. Calvin, for his part, seeks to do justice to both emphases at every stage in his book. In short, then, the aim of the *Institutes* is to show how the Creator of whom sinners are naturally ignorant, makes Himself savingly known to them; how He reveals Christ to them through His word, draws them to Himself through faith, and keeps them in grace till He brings them to glory. Everything that the book contains on any subject at all is there for the sake of its bearing on this one great central theme. And this is equivalent to saying that the standpoint from which the *Institutes* is

written corresponds exactly with that of the New Testament theologians themselves; which is just as it should be (though not, unfortunately, as it always is) in textbooks of biblical theology.

The *Institutes*, then, is in intention a theology of the gospel; and the essence of the gospel for Calvin, as for all the Reformers (and Paul before them), was the doctrine of justification by faith. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that this topic stands at the centre (spatially, as well as theologically) of Calvin's great work. It fills chapters xi-xviii of Book III—the core of the book which is itself the core of the *Institutes*.⁶ Calvin introduces the subject in words which sufficiently indicate his view of its centrality. "We must now discuss justification thoroughly," he writes, "bearing in mind that it is *the mainstay for upholding religion*, and so giving it the more care and attention. For unless you grasp first of all your position before God and His judgment upon you, you have no basis on which to establish salvation, nor to ground a life of piety towards God."⁷ This foundation-doctrine is in fact the focal centre of the *Institutes*, upon which everything else is orientated. What precedes the chapters dealing with it is a systematic survey of things that must first be known in order rightly to understand it (that knowledge of God comes from Scripture only [I. i-ix]; that God is Triune, Creator and Sovereign [I. x-xviii]; that religion means humble love and submission to God [I. ii]; that mankind is guilty, blind, and helpless in sin [II. i-v]; that Christ, the Divine-human Mediator, has procured salvation for us [II. vi-xvii]; what faith is [III. i-ii], and how it begets repentance [III. iii-v] and a Christian life [III. vi-x]). And what comes after is an account of what more the justified man needs to know in order to keep his faith in healthy exercise (that he is freed from the law, not for lawlessness, but that he may freely keep it [III. xix]; that it is the knowledge of God's free sovereign election as the source of his faith and salvation that will keep him humble, thankful, and undaunted by opposition [III. xxi-xxiv]; that he must keep before him the hope of resurrection, so as not to grow earthbound and slack [III. xxv]; that he must wait on the appointed ministry of word and sacrament in the Church for the strengthening of his faith [IV. i-xix]; and that he should be a loyal citizen at all times, since the state exists for the Church's protection [IV. xx]).⁸ Such is the magisterially conceived ground-plan of Calvin's theology of the gospel. So organic a presentation of Reformation teaching was without precedent, for the only two general statements of it which had previously appeared—Melancthon's *Loci Communes* (1521) and Zwingli's *Commentarius de vera et falsa Religione* (1525) were no more than a string of separate discussions. The feat of theological integration which Calvin performed in the *Institutes* was entirely his own work.

What has been said will already have given some indication of Calvin's qualifications for theological writing. He was, indeed, supremely well equipped to do it. He was a good linguist, a sure exegete, a precise and penetrating thinker who could see the implications of things and debate a case with skill; he had a mind of limitless energy and great constructive power, and a well-nigh infallible memory for all that he had read; he had a terse, nervous, lively Latin style of great elegance and purity ("too good for a theologian", said Joseph Scaliger); and—best of all—he had a heart that had itself been touched by the truths of which he wrote. He had been religious and upright from boyhood, but he had not been a Christian till, in his early twenties, "by a sudden conversion, God subdued and made docile my heart, which was more hardened against such matters than was to be expected of one so young". "His language suggests a restless young horse tamed and brought to feel the bridle by a dominating master," comments Basil Hall. "*Deus subegit*, God subdued, that phrase is the key to unlock Calvin's heart."⁹ "Not for nothing" Mr. Hall writes again, "did Calvin's seal show the emblem of a heart squeezed by a large hand, and underneath the motto *Prompte et*

sincere. Calvin was turned from the way he wanted to go, to follow, prompt and sincere, the dominating will of the sovereign God, to obey, and in all things to give Him the glory. Here is the root of ‘Calvinism’ . . .”¹⁰ *Pectus facit theologum*, the heart makes the theologian, said Anselm; and it was certainly true in this case. God had humbled John Calvin’s pride and broken his stubborn will, and John Calvin never forgot it. This no doubt explains the peculiar intensity with which he writes of man’s misery in sin, of God’s redeeming mercy and sovereign dominion, and of the authority of His word, and also the note of savage anguish which so often underlies his torrent-flow of high Isaianic scorn against those who opposed him on these points; for these, we may guess, were the precise points on which God had dealt with John Calvin, the proud young scholar, in bringing him, through terror and self-despair, to faith in Jesus Christ.¹¹ Calvin, then, had felt the power of the God of whom he wrote; and he wrote of God with power as a result. Calvin has *unction*. Read him, and he brings you into the presence of the God before whom he stood. He is one of the few who have written of God in a way that makes their readers *worship*.

* * * *

So much of his aims and qualities as a theologian: what of his achievement? Of this it is enough to say that he did what he set out to do. He did in fact present Reformation theology in its perfected form, appropriately organized, thoroughly integrated, with its biblical basis made clear at each point and its practical, polemical, pastoral, and ecclesiastical implications fully drawn out. “The system of doctrine taught by Calvin,” says Warfield, “is just the Augustinianism common to the whole body of the Reformers. . . . And this Augustinianism is taught by him . . . fundamentally as he learned it from Luther, whose fertile conceptions he completely assimilated, and most directly from Martin Bucer into whose practical, ethical point of view he perfectly entered. Many of the forms of statement most characteristic of Calvin—on such topics as Predestination, Faith, the stages of Salvation, the Church, the Sacraments—only reproduce, though of course with that clearness and religious depth peculiar to Calvin, the precise teachings of Bucer, who was above all others, accordingly, Calvin’s master in theology.”¹² The blocks of truth which, with Augustine’s aid, Luther quarried from Scripture and Bucer planed and polished, were taken by Calvin and erected into a finished theological edifice. And at certain points it was given to him, in the course of his constructive work, to improve in one way or another on what his predecessors had done; thus:

He was the first to expound the work of Christ under the rubric of the three offices. Earlier theologians from Eusebius onward had made reference to these offices, sometimes mentioning all three together, but (in Calvin’s words) “frigidly and with no great profit, due to ignorance of what each title comprehends.”¹³ The substance of Reformation teaching on this subject was already implicit in Luther’s development of the theme that I am saved, not by my own works, nor by what the Church does for me, but by Christ alone, first to last. Calvin, however, was the first to see that the biblical way to make the complete adequacy of Christ’s saving work explicit was to present Christ as *prophet*, teaching His people by His word and Spirit; *priest*, securing their salvation by His blood-shedding and intercession; and *king*, ruling, not them only, but the whole created order for their sake; thus, by His threefold ministry, compassing their whole salvation.

Also, Calvin was the first to offer a systematic account of the work of the Holy Spirit. Warfield repeatedly insists on this, regarding it as Calvin’s chief contribution to theology. “In the same sense in which we may say that the doctrine of sin and grace dates from Augustine,

the doctrine of satisfaction from Anselm, the doctrine of justification by faith from Luther—we must say that the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit is a gift from Calvin to the Church. It was he who first related the whole experience of salvation specifically to the working of the Holy Spirit, worked it out into its details, and contemplated its several steps and stages in orderly progress the product of the Holy Spirit's specific work in applying salvation to the soul. . . . What Calvin did was, specifically, to replace the (Roman) doctrine of the Church as the sole source of assured knowledge of God and sole institute of salvation, by the Holy Spirit. . . . The *Institutes* is, accordingly, just a treatise on the work of God the Holy Spirit in making God savingly known to sinful man. . . . Therefore it opens with the great doctrine of the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti*. . . . And therefore it centres in the great doctrine of Regeneration . . . the subjective *recovery* of man to God. . . . Above everything else (Calvin) deserves, therefore, the great name of *the theologian of the Holy Spirit*.”¹⁴ Luther had at least adumbrated every point in Calvin's statement of the doctrine, but it was Calvin who welded Luther's scattered insights into an ordered whole.

Again, Calvin was the first theologian in Christian history to do justice to the Trinitarian character of biblical soteriology, which is so prominent in Paul's epistles and John's gospel. On the basis of a sharp insistence on the absolute co-equality of the three Persons of the Godhead, which Warfield regards as epoch-making in itself¹⁵ Calvin analyses the saving of sinners as a single complex Divine operation in which all three persons share, the Son executing the will of the Father in redeeming the elect and the Spirit executing the will of both Father and Son in renewing them. This organic character of the saving action of the Godhead was more strongly stressed by Calvin's successors in the Arminian controversy, but it is already clearly expressed in Calvin's soteriology as set out in Books II and III of the *Institutes*.

Moreover, it was left to Calvin to write the first systematic study of the Christian life that the Christian Church produced—the golden little treatise which occupies *Inst.* III. vi-x, a pioneer work in a field which Reformed theologians were to make peculiarly their own during the century following.

Then, too, Calvin enriched the Protestant understanding of the Lord's Supper, which had come into dispute between Luther and Zwingli. Luther had held that the eucharistic bread actually contained Christ's body, thus seeming to imply that communion with Christ occurred in the Supper simply and specifically through the physical act of eating; Zwingli had replied that Christ's body, now glorified, was in heaven, not in the bread, and that the eucharist was a memorial of His death but no more—which seemed to imply that there was really no communion with Christ in the Supper at all. Calvin agreed that Christ's glorified body was in heaven, not in the sacrament, but maintained that what the sign signifies is Christ's death and the benefits thence deriving, and that the Supper is in truth an occasion when Christ gives Himself and His gifts to those who receive the sign as an act of faith in Him Whom it signifies—a richer and more biblical view than that of either of the others.

Calvin also developed the doctrine of the Church further than Luther and Zwingli had done. They, having defined the Church as a company of believers, inwardly ruled by Christ, had left the regulation of the Church's outward life to the civil magistrate. Calvin, however, insisted that the Church has a right and a duty to determine its faith, order its life, and exercise discipline for itself, through its own appointed officers, and that the magistrate was not called of God to rule the Church, but to recognize and maintain the Church's right to rule itself.

Such were Calvin's main contributions to theology. There were others too—for instance, on the relation between the two Testaments, the doctrine of the covenant of grace, and the theology of civilization, Calvin had important new things to say—but space does not permit any treatment of them here.

* * * *

What about divine sovereignty and predestination? it may be asked; did not Calvin go beyond the other Reformers in his handling of this? The rather surprising truth is that actually he stated these doctrines more cautiously, biblically, and religiously than either Luther or Zwingli had done—or, at any rate, had consistently done. All three maintained equally that God's sovereignty was absolute, that history was simply the temporal outworking of His eternal plan, that some had been unconditionally chosen for salvation while the rest had been reprobated; but Zwingli had tended to discuss these truths speculatively and Luther paradoxically, both with a certain admixture of philosophy into the bargain, and it was left to Calvin to expound predestination on an exclusively biblical basis from an exclusively religious and pastoral point of view. His vigour of assertion, here as elsewhere, must not blind us to the sobriety of his exposition. When he discusses predestination, his concern, as ever, is practical, ethical, and religious. He is not putting forward a philosophic theory of the cosmic process; he is declaring the riches of the grace of God from the word of God, with the purpose of showing how belief that God is sovereign in grace strengthens faith in, and prompts prayer to, Him on whom all depends, and evokes worship of the One from whom all blessings flow. Here again, in fact, Calvin is just stating the theology of the Reformation in its purest biblical and religious form.

Such, then, was John Calvin, the finest exegete, the greatest systematic theologian, and the profoundest religious thinker that the Reformation produced. Melancthon admiringly referred to him as “the theologian” *simpliciter*, and few would deny his right to the title. He was Bible-centred in his teaching, God-centred in his outlook, and Christ-centred in his soteriology. His emphases were the great evangelical emphases of the Reformation, and earlier of the New Testament itself: by faith *alone*, by grace *alone*, by Christ *alone*. He was controlled by two convictions which are written on all regenerate hearts, and are expressed in all acts of real prayer and real worship—that God is all and man is nothing; and that glory is due to God alone for everything. And his aim as a theologian was simply to give expression to these convictions, in the form in which Scripture presents them. “The Calvinist,” wrote Warfield, “is the man who has seen God, and who, having seen God in His glory, is filled on the one hand, with a sense of his own unworthiness to stand in God's sight as a creature, and much more as a sinner, and on the other hand, with adoring wonder that nevertheless this God is a God Who receives sinners. He who believes in God without reserve and is determined that God shall be God to him, in all his thinking, feeling, willing—in the entire compass of his life activities, intellectual, moral, spiritual— . . . is . . . a Calvinist. . . . The Calvinist is the man who sees God behind all phenomena, and in all that occurs recognizes the hand of God, working out His will; who makes the attitude of the soul to God in prayer the permanent attitude in all its life activities; and who casts himself on the grace of God alone, excluding every trace of dependence on self from the whole work of his salvation.”¹⁶ Such a Calvinist was John Calvin; and it is evident from the definition that a Calvinist is nothing but a consistently Christian Christian. And this is the note on which we would conclude. We must not think of Calvin as a man who set out to propagand for a party line, but as an expositor of the Christian religion as such. Calvin held that his theology was just

biblical Christianity, nothing more and therefore nothing less. If his claim was ever true, it is still true; and we ought to face it.

J. I. PACKER

Endnotes:

- 1) On this, cf. A. Kuyper, *Calvinism*, pp. 154ff.
- 2) Only the Solomonic writings. Judges, Ruth, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Revelation, 2 and 3 John, were omitted.
- 3) B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism*, p. 389, n. 21.
- 4) *Abstersio Calumniarum*, p. 263.
- 5) It is worth remembering that *Institutio Christianae Religionis* means “Instruction in the Christian Religion”, and that the full title of the first edition was “Instruction in the Christian Religion, containing almost the whole sum of godliness (*pietatis*) and all that needs to be known in the doctrine of salvation: a work most worthy of perusal by all who aspire to godliness”.
- 6) “The fundamental interest of Calvin as a theologian lay . . . in the region broadly designated soteriological . . . his interest was most intense in the application to the sinful soul of the salvation wrought out by Christ.” (Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 484.) The six chapters of the original 1536 *Institutes*—on the Law; Faith; Prayer; the Sacraments (2); Christian liberty—all bear directly on this theme, which is the subject of Book III of the 1559 edition.
- 7) *Inst.*, III. xi. 1.
- 8) The practical bearing of each of these topics on the life of faith is indicated in the paragraphs which introduce them: cf. *Inst.*, III. xix. 1, xx. 1-2, xxi. 1, xxv. 1, IV. i. 1, xiv. 1, xx. 1.
- 9) *John Calvin*, p. 14. The quotation is from Calvin’s preface to the Commentary on the Psalms.
- 10) *Op. cit.*, p. 17, commenting on Calvin’s call to Geneva.
- 11) If we may take the anonymous conversion-story in the Epistle to Sadoleto as Calvin’s own, our guess becomes a certainty.
- 12) *Calvin and Augustine*, p. 22. On the details of Calvin’s debt to Bucer, cf. F. Wendel, *Calvin: sources et evolution de sa pensée religieuse*, pp. 100 ff.
- 13) *Inst. II.* xv. 1. For the history of the three-office formula before Calvin, cf. J. F. Jansen: *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Work of Christ*, pp. 23 ff.
- 14) *Op. cit.*, pp. 485 ff.
- 15) See “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity”, *op. cit.*, pp. 189ff.
- 16) *Op. cit.*, pp. 491 f.