

TITLE:

Write a biography of a key Reformation figure, illustrating both the way in which that person was a child of their time, and innovative or revolutionary aspects of their ministry.

A.....*Introduction.*

B.....*Biographical Sketch.*

C.....*Character.*

D.....*Intellectual Influences.*

E.....*Calvin's Biblicism.*

F.....*Calvin's Ecclesiology.*

G.....*Conclusion.*

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**A. Introduction.**

Although John Calvin belongs to the second generation of Reformers, his impact on doctrine and practice has exceeded that of most of them, including possibly even Luther. Whether this is owing to, or in spite of, the fact that he was more of a systematiser than an innovator<sup>1</sup> is hard to say. But the widespread influence he had amongst European Protestants of his time, and has had worldwide since, seems to have been more because he was recognised as the most thoroughgoing Biblicist of the Reformation.

Nevertheless an examination of his life and intellectual development casts light on both the strengths and weaknesses of his ministry.

**B. Biographical Sketch.**

Jean Cauvin<sup>2</sup> was born in Noyon, France in 1509 to a petty bourgeois family with aristocratic connections. Intended for the priesthood from an early age, probably because of his intellectual promise, he obtained two ecclesiastical benefices through his ambitious father by the age of fourteen, when he was sent to Paris to study.

He took theology at the sternly traditional Collège de Montaigu, anti-Lutheran and anti-humanist<sup>3</sup>, where he was taught by John Mair in Occamist Scholasticism, and also studied the Fathers, especially Augustine<sup>4</sup>.

Despite becoming acquainted with influential humanists and possibly even Lutherans, he himself remained '*obstinately*'<sup>5</sup> Catholic. But when his father transferred him to Orléans to study the more lucrative law, humanist influences increased, and his interests became wider and more literary. After his father died he became a thoroughly humanist scholar, until his '*sudden*

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*conversion*<sup>6</sup> around 1533 to the Reformed faith, whose Biblical purity had first offended him, then won him over.

He soon became active in Protestant apologetics and had to escape Paris, returning to Noyon to renounce the benefices his integrity would not allow him to hold after his break with Rome. Fleeing more general persecution later, he went to study Patristic and Reformation theology in peace in Basel, where he published his ‘catechism’, the *Institutes*. He began to gain a reputation as a preacher and teacher.

This is why the Genevan Reformer, Farel, persuaded him by imprecation, and against his will, to become the Pastor there in 1536. Their attempts to impose church discipline soon led to their ejection. But after a time pastoring the French Protestants in Strasbourg, Geneva invited him back. He spent the rest of his life teaching and writing, seeking to put his vision for a Biblical Church into practice, and perhaps most importantly<sup>7</sup>, preaching to his congregation no less than ten times a fortnight<sup>8</sup>.

### ***C. Character.***

Calvin’s early life suggests an individual of intellectual promise, and therefore the main focus of his father’s ambitions<sup>9</sup>. To his father’s strong will he seems to have been willingly compliant, so that when his father changed his course of study from his favoured philosophy to law, he writes:

I strove to devote myself faithfully [to it] in obedience to my father.<sup>10</sup>

This basic compliancy seems to account both for his dislike of public life<sup>11</sup>, and for the essential conservatism which delayed his break from Rome

and informed his later work: paradoxically the radical nature of his reforms depended on a deeply *conservative* approach to Scripture and early Church traditions.

But more than balancing this characteristic of self-effacement was an intellectual self-confidence that emerges even in his earliest work, a commentary on Seneca, whose questioning of the great Erasmus seemed to its original readers '*presumptuous and self-important*'<sup>12</sup>.

The combination of these two traits perhaps explains the later reputation for intransigence of this '*unpolished and bashful*'<sup>13</sup> man. In 1546 he insisted on the public humiliation of a Council member who had accused him of preaching false doctrine<sup>14</sup>. Personal pride or vindictiveness seems a far less likely reason for this than the intellectual conviction that his calling and handling of Scripture were valid, and a desire to see the supreme authority of Scripture maintained. That such self-confidence is a dangerous weakness cannot be doubted, but it is also the pre-requisite of a great leader.

Just occasionally Calvin's personal conservatism outweighs his intellectual rigour in matters of doctrine. For example, the mediæval legacy of a church co-terminous with the community, and designated by universal infant baptism was more or less taken for granted by him, as by the other magisterial Reformers. His use of covenant theology to justify infant baptism carries much weight, but looks a little strained in his practice of baptising the children of '*idolaters and excommunicated persons*' on the basis that some of their ancestors must have been within the covenant<sup>15</sup>.

In general however, the depth of his erudition and the soundness of his reasoning are such that his willingness to hold his ground should perhaps be taken as a strength, rather than as a weakness.

Calvin's moral strength has often obscured his warmth and compassion, perhaps partly in contrast to Luther, who wore these things on his sleeve. But his sermons, and particularly his letters, show he was '*a man of deep and lasting affection*'<sup>16</sup>. Even his marriage, often viewed as '*a convenient means of relieving [him]self of domestic burdens*'<sup>17</sup>, is revealed by his correspondence to have been a relationship of love and companionship<sup>18</sup>.

One other aspect worthy of note in Calvin's character is his practical asceticism, despite his rejection of asceticism in the mediæval sense as a virtue<sup>19</sup>. Whilst Luther's asceticism came through his monasticism, Calvin's was no doubt initially imbibed during his years at the Collège de Montaigu, but continued through his single-minded devotion to study and work. Without it, it is doubtful that he would have accomplished what he did.

#### ***D. Intellectual Influences.***

Calvin was initially trained in the old '*via moderna*' of nominalist scholastic theology. Though he later rejected the whole approach, its influence may be seen in the sense of logic that he brought to all his work. Unlike the scholastics, however, he did not employ logic to build a monolithic system, but as a tool to interpret the divine texts<sup>20,21</sup>. Scotist thought, with its nominalist disjunction of Creator and creation, has also been said to have contributed to Calvin's key doctrine of the sovereignty of God, with its consequences in providence and election<sup>22</sup>. Certainly nominalist ideas about

the limits of reason and the need for revelation helped lead him indirectly to one of his greatest contributions, the scientific, inductive, study of Scripture<sup>23</sup>.

But his greatest philosophical influence was that of humanism, whose tastes and methodology so pervade his work that, for all his repudiation of its values, he can be said to have remained a humanist even after his conversion<sup>24</sup>.

A background in humanism underpinned his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, and his respect for both the Scriptures and the Patristic texts, as well as his wholesale rejection of scholasticism. It affected the stylishness of his writing in both French and Latin, and made his thought accessible and attractive to the leading thinkers of his day. Humanism had influenced the other Reformers too, but Calvin's accomplishment in the humanistic disciplines helped ensure for his writing a continent-wide influence.

But his humanism would have counted for little in the Reformation had it not been for the way that Calvin synthesised it with the Protestant thinking of Luther, Zwingli, Bucer and others. Humanism, like all Calvin's other influences, became the servant of evangelical doctrine, which he began to study intensively in Basel after his conversion<sup>25</sup>. As was stated initially, Calvin's *systematisation* of Reformed doctrine, initially in the *Institutes* but later in his commentaries and other works, was more important than any radically original contribution to theology.

For example, his 'trademark' doctrine of predestination, though stated with different emphases, came directly from Luther, who accorded it great importance. Indeed it was actually the first subject disputed against Eck at

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Leipzig, by Carlstadt. On this subject Calvin uses Augustine virtually identically to Luther, and it is hard to believe that his great dependence on Augustine does not derive from the older Reformer. At the same time Calvin's doctrine of God's sovereign providence, to which he subordinates predestination, had even before his conversion found its seeds in the Stoic philosophy of Seneca, of which he states:

...this is also the teaching of our religion, that there is no power but God and that everything is ordered by him, according to Romans 13.<sup>26</sup>

In his hands, however, Stoic providence lost its fatalism because grounded in the character of a personal God. Thus, his humanistic background helped shape his formulation of Reformation doctrine, though he derived its themes from his evangelical predecessors.

#### ***E. Calvin's Biblicism.***

Despite the last point Calvin's doctrine, whilst it may have been suggested by the Reformers and buttressed by Patristic and even philosophical sources, was fundamentally derived from none of these, but from Scripture. Taking on board the radical Biblicism which distinguished Swiss Reformers like Zwingli from the Germans, Calvin subordinated his doctrine to Scripture in a way nowhere better shown than in those passages where he refuses to follow logic further than the limits of the revealed word:

If we give due weight to the consideration, that the word of the Lord is the only way that can conduct us to the investigation of whatever is lawful for us to hold with regard to him ... it will curb and restrain all presumption.<sup>27</sup>

So Calvin on predestination, though he owed something to Luther and more to Augustine, relied principally on a careful exegesis of Paul, who in turn, though similarly informed by Pharisaism's doctrine of divine sovereignty, based his teaching on the whole thrust of Scripture.

Of course there are times when Calvin does not live up to his own standards, but overall he reads more of his doctrine *out of* Scripture (rather than *into* it) than possibly any previous theologian, and most since.

But behind Calvin's Biblicism lies his central concern, which is the Person of Christ. His scholarship is not bibliolatry because the Bible is the Word of Christ, through which the Spirit mediates Jesus to us. The sacraments too are seen as the means of mediating the life of Jesus to us, and so whilst avoiding the 'real presence' theology of Luther, he also steers clear of the extreme sacramentalism of the Anabaptists. Even in the doctrine of election Christ is central, for in preaching on Ephesians 1.4 Calvin says:

It is true that in regarding our miseries he had pity and compassion on us to relieve us, but that was because he already loved us in our Lord Jesus Christ. God, then, must have had before him his pattern and mirror in which to see us, that is to say, he must have first looked on our Lord Jesus Christ before he could choose us and call us.<sup>28</sup>

#### ***F. Calvin's Ecclesiology.***

One of Calvin's most significant contributions is his doctrine of the Church. Once again we see an interaction between a purely Biblical concept and contemporary influences, and particularly the post-mediæval situation of the whole European Church.

He went much further than Luther in defining the Church in Biblical terms as a living community where the word was preached faithfully, the sacraments celebrated biblically, and proper discipline maintained<sup>29</sup>. Like the Anabaptists he saw active participation as essential, but unlike them, perhaps because of his covenantal view of baptism, sought to include the whole baptised community, which meant the whole of Geneva.

During his first stay there, he produced a confession of faith to be subscribed by all the citizens. Had he, the magistrates, and indeed the people themselves not been thoroughly imbued with the notion of the 'Christian State', this might have sorted the sheep from the goats. But since even the most reprobate saw themselves as part of the Church, it led instead to strife, and then to Calvin's expulsion. Even after his return, many of the tensions in the Geneva ministry can be traced to the attempt to discipline those who, in Scriptural terms, were not part of the community of faith at all. The unpopularity of Calvin today, especially in Switzerland, probably owes more to this than to doctrinal difficulties.

However, the Genevan Church was a sufficient success to cause Protestants from all over Europe to try to emulate it. Unlike Lutheranism or Anglicanism, the Presbyterian model can function effectively in or outside a State Church, and even under conditions of persecution.

### ***G. Conclusion.***

Although John Calvin was undoubtedly a product of his culture, and although this clearly influenced his teaching, it is actually very hard to judge the extent of this influence. This is simply because he remains so much of an

influence on contemporary Christianity. The 39 Articles of the Church of England, Evangelical ‘Neo-puritanism’, the theology of Karl Barth – all owe much to him. Even the predominant scientific world-view of our society has been traced back to him<sup>30</sup>. All this puts us at a disadvantage in setting him in context. But these facts in themselves show his importance, and make it worthwhile studying his teaching more carefully than has been the case for most of this century.

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<sup>1</sup> *‘Careful Calvin orchestrated Protestant theology most skilfully, but fertile Martin Luther wrote nearly all the tunes’* – J I Packer, in Dowley, 1990, p.374.

<sup>2</sup> Later latinized to *Johannes Calvinus*, hence English *John Calvin*.

<sup>3</sup> Wendel, 1963, p.18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>5</sup> Preface to *Commentary on Psalms*: quoted *ibid.*, p.20.

<sup>6</sup> Preface to *Commentary on Psalms*: quoted *Letters*, p.20.

<sup>7</sup> *‘However much may be said of Calvin’s Geneva in terms of its reformation, its discipline, its theological leadership, and its Bible production, it was as an exemplar of Reformed preaching that it stood pre-eminent.’* *Sermons on Ephesians, Introduction*, p.vi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.viii.

<sup>9</sup> Wendel, *op. cit.*, p.17.

<sup>10</sup> Preface to *Commentary on Psalms*: quoted *ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>11</sup> Preface to *Commentary on Psalms*: quoted *Letters*, p.20.

<sup>12</sup> Wendel, *op. cit.*, p.36.

<sup>13</sup> Preface to *Commentary on Psalms*: quoted *Letters*, p.20.

<sup>14</sup> Wendel, *op. cit.*, p.86.

<sup>15</sup> *Letters*, p.215-6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>17</sup> Wendel, *op. cit.*, p.65.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters.*, p.103.

<sup>19</sup> *‘Have done, then, with that inhuman philosophy which, in allowing no use of the creatures but for necessity, ...maliciously deprives us of the lawful fruit of the divine beneficence...’* *Institutes III.10.3.*

<sup>20</sup> Ferguson & Wright, 1988, p.121.

<sup>21</sup> Reid, 1982, p.14.

<sup>22</sup> Wendel, *op. cit.*, p.127.

<sup>23</sup> Gay, 1998, p.120.

<sup>24</sup> Wendel., *op. cit.*, p.33.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>26</sup> *Commentary on de Clementia*, quoted in Wendel., *op. cit.*, p.30.

<sup>27</sup> *Institutes III.21.2.*

<sup>28</sup> *Sermons on Ephesians*, p.33.

<sup>29</sup> Wendel, *op. cit.*, p.50.

<sup>30</sup> Gay, *op. cit.*, p.113.

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