

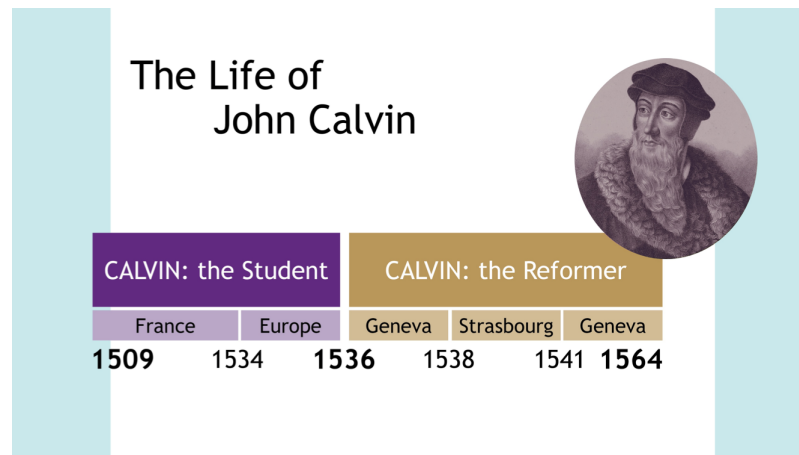
With the end of the Exodus series, I have decided to do a short church history series, a brief summer diversion. My thought was to take significant figures from our heritage as Christians and highlight one each week, men and women who have very much shaped our present understanding of the teachings of the Bible (both negatively and positively). My thought is to survey their lives, tell their stories, and then explain how they have shaped Christian understanding.

John Calvin
(10 July 1509- 27 May 1564)



I. The Outline of Calvin's Life

"Calvin was by nature uncommunicative about his personal history, a certain timidity, an aristocratic inclination to screen himself from the public. And finally his conviction that the individual is nothing in himself but only in so far as he is the instrument of the divine will, caused him to remain silent about many events that would have interested biographers (Wendel, *Calvin*, 15)."



1509: Calvin was born in Noyon, Picardy, France, into a devout Catholic family. His father, Gerard was a church lawyer, the bishop's secretary. His family comprised three brothers and two sisters. His mother died when Calvin was six.

All four sons became clerics in youth (a benefice was a church appointment with a salary without duties). Calvin had the two.

1523-1527: Calvin prepared for university at the College de la Marche, then the College de Montaigu (there he studied for the priesthood, but in 1527 turned to study Law). He did so in the context of an intense struggle between advocates of the emerging humanist movement and the vestiges of Scholasticism exasperated by writings of Luther and the growing Protestant movement.

1528-1529: Calvin studied Law at the University of Orleans. Gerard was excommunicated for Protestant leanings.

1529-31: Calvin transferred to the University of Bourges and there studied the biblical languages.

1531: Calvin received the Law degree after his return to Orleans, but never practiced the profession.

It was at some unspecific time between 1527-1533 that Calvin accepted the ideas of Luther. In the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, we have only this: “First, when I was too firmly addicted to the papal superstitions to be drawn easily out of such a deep mire, by a sudden conversion He brought my mind (already more rigid than suited my age) to submission [to Him]. I was so inspired by a taste of true religion, and I burned with such a desire to carry my study further, that although I did not drop other subjects, I had no zeal for them.”

1534-36: Calvin traveled to reformation centers in Europe (Basel, Zurich, Geneva) using the name Martinus Lucianius to avoid detection by Catholic authorities. In 1534 in Noyon, he declined the priesthood and stepped down from the salaried benefices. “I . . . wished to find myself a quiet hiding place—a wish which has never yet been granted for me; for every retreat I found became a public lecture room. When the one thing I craved was obscurity and leisure, God fastened upon me so many cords of various kinds that He never allowed me to remain quiet, and in spite of my reluctance dragged me into the limelight.”

In 1536, he was in Italy under another assumed name. Charles d’Espeville. By this time, he had publicly identified with the reformation. Leaving Ferrara, he desired to reside in Strasbourg and so passed through Geneva (The city was introduced to Reformation teachings by William Farel and Peter Viret). Calvin was discovered and Farel pled with him to stay and help.

1536-1538: Calvin sought to reform the city with Farel and Viret but was unsuccessful. Calvin seems to have pushed for reforms the city father would not accept. Calvin and Farel were forced out (Farel to Neuchatel, Calvin to Strasbourg).

1538-41: Calvin pastored a French refugee church of 500 in Strasbourg coming under the influence of Martin Bucer, the city's reformer. Additionally, he began to teach Paul's letters and the Gospel of John in an academy, publishing a commentary on the Romans.

Under the influence of Martin Bucer, but also in reading Augustine and Chrysostom, he came to embrace the doctrine of predestination and focused on divine providence. His Lutheran influences faded away, even though he signed the Lutheran Augsburg Confession in 1530. He moved to a "Reformed" or Calvinist approach to theology.

In Strasbourg he married Idelette de Bure, a widow, adopting her three children. They had one child together, but he died in infancy. Says Calvin, "The Lord has certainly inflicted a heavy and severe wound on us, by the death of our little son, but He is our Father, and knows what is expedient for his children."

1541-1564: Calvin was called back to Geneva as the city was in turmoil. He explained his return this way: "Afterwards the Lord had pity on the City of Geneva and quieted the deadly conflicts there. I was compelled against my own will, to take again my former position. The safety of that church was far too important in my mind for me to refuse to meet even death for its sake. But my timidity kept suggesting to me excuses of every color for refusing to put my shoulder again under so heavy a burden. However, the demand of duty and faith at length conquered and I went back to the flock from which I had been driven away. With how much grief, with how many tears, and in how great anxiety I went, God is my best witness."

Calvin was a preacher (he began his preaching with the subsequent text

he finished preaching three years earlier!) For twenty-five years, he preached every day weekly and twice on Sunday; in addition, he lectured on theology three times each week. He seems to have been a dramatic, talented speaker.

Calvin was a master organizer. He organized the four churches in Geneva, himself preaching at St. Pierre, with four offices each (deacons, elders, pastor, and doctor). The pastors were in charge of preaching, the doctors teaching of pastors, elders ruling with the pastors, and deacons divided into three by duties (finances, visiting the poor and sick, the whole assembly in caring). The pastor and twelve from the city council formed the consistory, a legislative body for all the churches.

He also established an academy that today is the University of Geneva.

In 1549 Idelette died. He wrote to his fellow cleric, Peter Viret: “I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my indigence, but even of my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry.... I now suppress the sorrow of my heart....”

In his latter years Calvin suffered ulcerous hemorrhoids, malignant tuberculosis, quartan fever, severe headaches, indigestion, cataracts, and pleurisy; he brought much on himself with incessant study. When his legs could no longer carry him to church, he was carried to church by others, preaching his last sermon on 6 February 1564. It was said of him: “He was driven by what he most valued to extreme sacrifice. Duty was not an option; it was a goal that drove him to such excess that he endangered his health and made his life miserable at times.”

He left instruction for his burial in three separate places but may not be buried in any of them. He wished not to be idolized.

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II. The Psychological Profile of Calvin

- A passive obsessive-compulsive workaholic.
- Frail and weak of constitution.
- Deep in spiritual truth and influence though short on love at times.
- Not an idealist, a realist (life has ups and downs; declines, inclines, and plateaus).

III. The Contribution of Calvin to Protestant Understanding

A. Areas of recognized contribution

1. *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. One scholar of Calvin captures the influence of this book ("one of the few books that have profoundly affected the course of history"). The first edition (1536) comprised six chapters, (1539) seventeen chapters, (1543) twenty-one chapters, (1550) divided into chapter and divisions, and 1559 (eighty chapters in four books.

Book I: Of the Knowledge of God the Creator.

Book II: Of the Knowledge of God the Redeemer.

Book III: Of the Internal Means of the Grace of Christ.

Book IV: Of the External Means of the Grace of Christ, The Church.

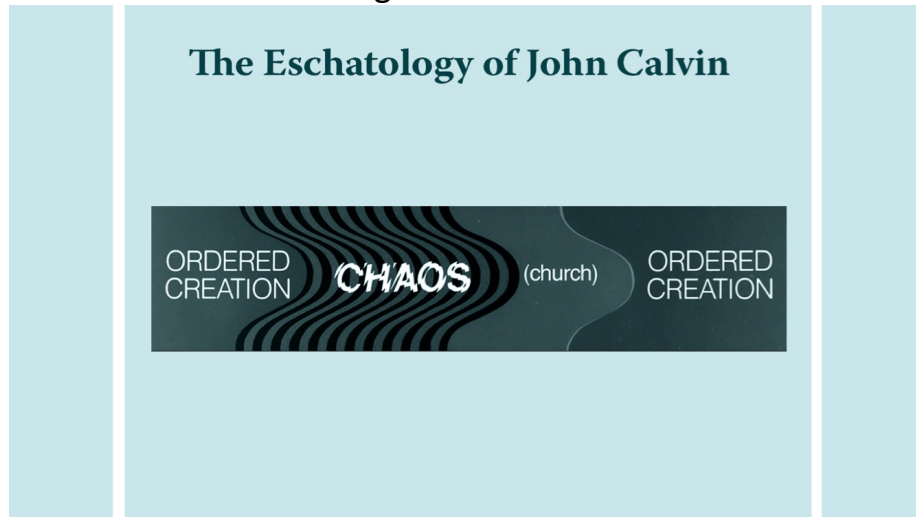
- The first edition (1536) was addressed to Francis I of France as an apologetic, arguing that we ought not be persecuted because we are neither novel nor heretical.
- The volume is a biblical theology, not a systematic theology.
- The volume grew out of Calvin's growing knowledge of the Bible as well as the controversies he encountered.
- Some interesting take-aways from the book:
 - *Calvin does not use the word "sovereignty," instead "providence."
 - *The discussion of predestination is not in the discussion of God (I), but in the discussion of salvation (III). Later Calvinists do not do such. Calvin sees election as a means of grace,

- *The book begins with a letter to a king and ends with a discussion of civil government. Calvin is concerned with life in a fallen, troubled world, not in the creation of a utopian theocracy.
 - *Calvin takes into account the inadequacy of human rational ability, the reality of an incomplete disclosure of God, and the incomprehensibility of God. He is willing to say, "I don't know."
 - * Scholars have found two great themes in Calvin's book: piety and the Lordship of God. They say, first, we are to read it through the grid of personal and experiential knowledge, it is a handbook on piety. Second, we are to see his vision of God, it is an attempt to crown God as Lord of the nations. "God is king," says Battles, is the theme of the book.
2. As a second-generation Protestant, the issue of divine justification the focal point of the first, Calvin's emphasis was more on the growth and maturity of the church. It was more God-focused than Luther's redemptive focus.

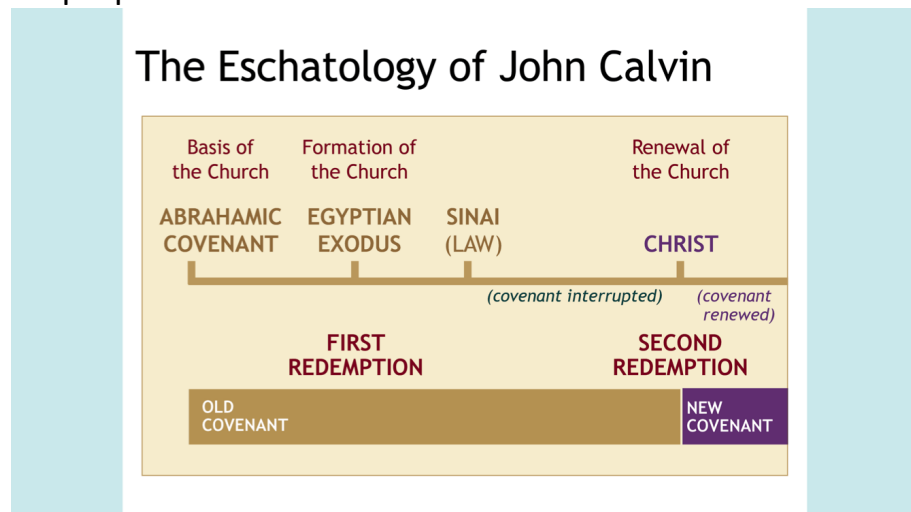


3. Calvin repudiated the absolute authority of the Late Medieval Church, though he also realized that you cannot take away without putting something greater in its place. He did so by the perspective of the absolute authority of God. He looked at theology, not through the lens of a church, nor the lens human ability and duty, but the actions of God as having priority. His starting point was God and heaven, God's actions as determinative of all consequences.
- B. Areas of debated contribution

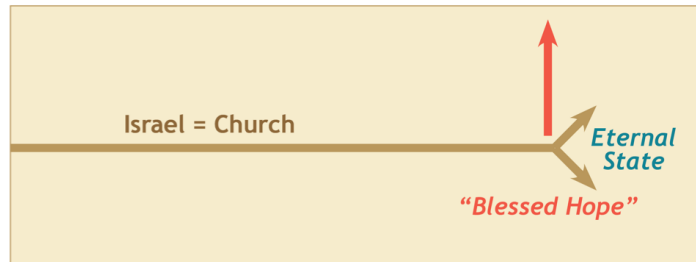
1. Calvin embraced and articulated Classic Amillennialism through his explanation, at times, embryonic (not fully developed).
 - a. Calvin saw the church as the means through which God ordained to reverse the damaging effects of the Fall. The church functions to be a picture of the re-created kingdom in the eternal state.



- b. Calvin's understanding of the story of Scripture, which He understood to be the unfolding of divine glory and praise through the gathering of a redeemed people and the triumph over His enemies, was rooted in the biblical covenants, principally the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and the New. It embraced a single people of God within the unfolding of the redemptive purpose.



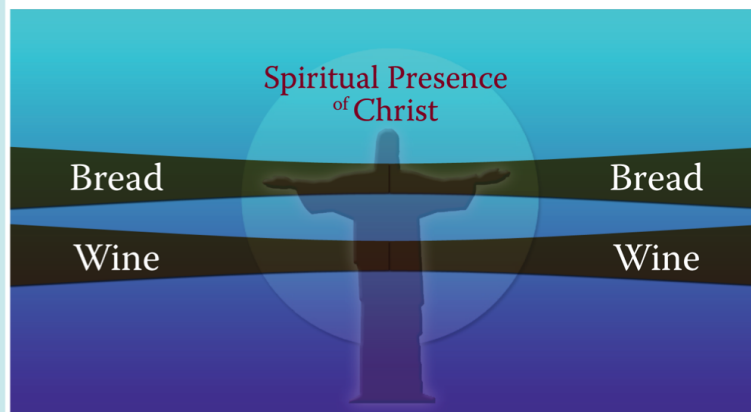
The Eschatology of John Calvin



2. Calvin understood the Lord's Table to be a celebration of the spiritual presence of Christ with the people of God. It is more than a memorial to the events that culminated in redemption. To Calvin, we are lifted spiritually to heaven for a unique time of fellowship as we focus on the symbolism of the Table.

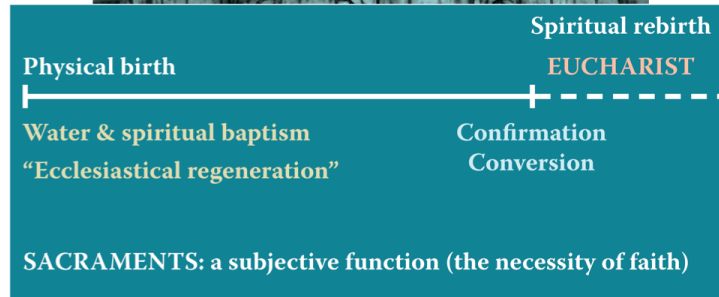
Spiritual Presence

Calvin's concept of the Lord's Table



3. Calvin advocated infant baptism as a sign of covenantal relationship, that OT circumcision had been replaced by NT Baptism. Like circumcision, Baptism did not save; it placed a child into the community of the faithful where he/she could be taught, and hopefully embrace, the redeemer.

The Reformers and Baptism



4. Calvin believed that the state was the defender of the church against all threats, morally and theologically; the church was the conscience of the state providing moral and theological direction.

The local church was to be governed by the session, the teaching and pastoral officers. When issues could not be resolved by the session, it would be resolved by the regional sessions that we would call today "presbytery". It was a republican form of government ("of" and "for" the people, not "by" the people)

The Development of Church Government

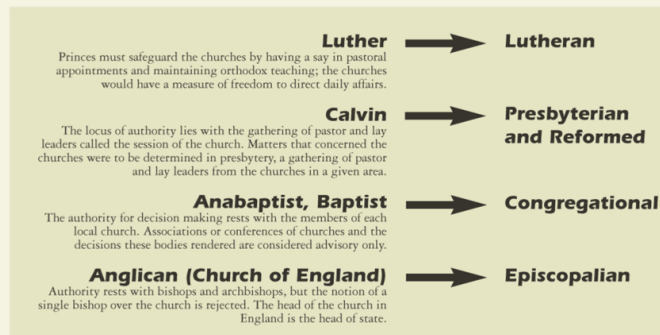


Chart 8

IV. Some Concluding Thoughts about Calvin and Calvinism.

Was Calvin a Calvinist? This is not an idle question. Calvinism is a movement that emerged from the dominance of Calvin's influence, particularly through *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. All movements develop as they emerge in new contexts addressing unique issues to them and the times. This is clearly true of the history of Calvinism; it was subsequently shaped by the rise of movements that threatened it, calling for reaction. *Movements are living organisms*.

- A. Calvin did not embrace the "Covenant of Works" with Adam; that emerged in the 17th century in the Dutch Republic of Holland.
- B. Calvin did not invent the "Five Points of Calvinism." That emerged embryonically in the 17th century as the movement was confronted with the rationalism of the Enlightenment, as well as Arminianism.
- C. Calvin was willing to say he did not know taking the position that, when the Bible stops providing data, we should stop asking and realize that God only has all the answers.
- D. Movements under duress from threat often tend to be defensive, confident, and rash, and arrogant.

Barth's comment is worth pondering by all of us. Is our confidence in the person and work of Christ or what we have been taught. Is it possible that we can always be right? "Calvinism is not the gospel pure and simple. Like all isms, it stands under the judgment of the gospel (*Theology of John Calvin*, 355)."

Applications:

- 1. Calvin had feet of clay like all of us, yet he served God well. God does not require the absence of deformity, tragedy, or depravity of His people, simply availability.
- 2. Calvin is a lesson that the negative side of our characters will be remembered, even followed, by those who look up to us as models. We will all leave a negative and positive heritage.
- 3. Calvin is a great lesson to us of the need to rest from our labors. While we must not be lazy in our service, we should be aware that we can shorten it by over-zealousness in it.
- 4. Calvin left us a legacy that should be appreciated and followed by all of us in His devotion to the Savior. He loved His Lord!

