

The Life of John Calvin – Part 2

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An overview of the life of John Calvin and his effect upon the reformation church
2. aim – To cause us to understand the great reformer and how he affected the reformed church

b. outline

1. The Biography of Calvin
2. The Theology of Calvin
3. The Importance of Calvin

c. overview

1. the **biography** of John Calvin
 - a. born 1509 in France, died 1564 (at 54) – spent his formative years in France, later emigrated to Switzerland after having come to faith and joined the Protestant movement
 - b. pastored in Geneva from 1536-38, and again from 1541 until his death
 1. he pastored in Strasbourg alongside Martin Bucer, his mentor and theological influence
2. the **theology** of John Calvin
 - a. any *faithful* biography of Calvin would have to include an examination of his *theology*, because it is in *this area* that Calvin was most influential
 - b. so ... tonight we will examine his beliefs and practices, and try to estimate his *importance* to the Protestant church, particularly considering some of his **controversy**

II. The Theology of Calvin

Content

a. the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

1. (**see before**) Calvin intended to live out his life studying literature, to settle in a calm environment where he could study Scripture and write about the faith
 - a. when he fled to Basel, that was his original intention, but on his way to Strasbourg, he was “delayed” in Geneva by William Farel, and became pastor there, for most of the rest of his life
2. his main project was to write a short summary of the Christian faith *from a Protestant perspective* – this was over against the *main* discussions of Protestant literature of the time
 - a. **i.e.** Protestant thinking was concerned *primarily* with **polemics**: those issues that were *specifically* held to be wrong within Catholic thinking, and how Protestants understood them
 - b. Calvin desired to pen a treatise on a *robust* view of theology *flowing out of the ramifications of justification by faith*: the Trinity, the incarnation, creeds, Christian freedom, etc.
 1. **IOW**: Calvin was not content to just write about things he *disagreed with* in the Catholic Church
 - c. so ... Calvin began his *magnus opus: the Institutes of the Christian Religion*
3. the first version was published in **1536, in Basel**, as a short and small book (516 pages)
 - a. it was originally written to Francis I, and entreated him to desist in his persecution of Protestants
 1. **remember**: it was because of Francis’ reversal that Calvin was forced to flee France
 - b. it contained: four chapters on *the Law*, the *Creed*, the *Lord’s Prayer*, and the *sacraments*; two chapters on the “false” *sacraments of Rome and Christian Freedom*
 1. **IOW**: Calvin attempted to show Francis a *systematic* view of various doctrines specifically related to the *truth* of the Protestant view of Christianity, in the hope of swaying his actions
 - c. the book was an immediate success – the first edition sold out *in nine months*
 1. copies of the book were sown far and wide, and it became a deep influence of systematic thinking in the time period
4. continuing versions were published successively throughout the remainder of his life:
 - b. new versions were paired: one in Latin and (about a year later) one in French
 1. 1539 (17 chaps.), from Strasbourg (in Latin); in 1541, from Geneva (in French)
 2. 1543-45 (21 chaps.), 1559-60 – this last edition becoming the **definitive text** of the *Institutes*
 - c. the original edition was six chapters; the *definitive text* was four (4) books of 80 chapters
 1. Book One: God and revelation, creation and the nature of humanity
 2. Book Two: God as Redeemer, as revealed in the OT and NT in Jesus Christ
 3. Book Three: the work of the Spirit to share in the grace of Christ and the fruit this produces

4. Book Four: the “external means” of the church and the sacraments
 5. the outline of the books follow the typical pattern of a reformed, systematic, theology:
 - a. God → Scripture (revelation) → creation → humanity → sin (the will) → redemption (the works of Christ and the Spirit) → the church → civil government
 - b. **note:** the *Institutes* begin with God (not Scripture) since God is the **primary subject** of all theology – Scripture *reveals* the nature of God, but God is the eternal *source* of it (thus, Scripture is *subordinate* to God as *his* revelation)
 5. the *Institutes* show a profound knowledge of both Scripture and of ancient Christian literature (particularly of Augustine) – they also reveal the controversies of the 16th C. in their context
 - a. **e.g.** despising of any “visible form” of God, the “False Church” of Rome, the “Popish Mass”, the five “False Sacraments”, the “supplements” of satisfaction (**i.e.** indulgences and purgatory)
 - b. but ... these are all *intertwined* within the larger scope of his theological positions
- b. the primary ecclesiastical issue of the time**
1. the *main* issue dividing Protestants in the 16th C. was the presence of Christ in communion
 - a. **remember:** the Anabaptists were considered heretics by most Protestants, thus their persecution – their issue (of course) was the *first ordinance* of the church: baptism
 - b. this was the main issue between Luther and Zwingli in their debate at Marburg
 1. for Catholics, the elements *became* the literal and physical body and blood of Christ
 2. for Luther, Christ was *immediately* present in the elements, although they did not change
 3. for Zwingli, Christ was *symbolically* present in the elements, and only as a *memorial* to him
 - c. Calvin followed the lead of Bucer, and took an *intermediate* position between Luther and Zwingli:
 1. Christ is present (not merely symbolically), although his presence is *spiritual* in nature
 2. **i.e.** it is a *true divine action* for the church to partake of the sacrament, even though the body of Christ does not descend from heaven (in any way) – believers are “taken to heaven” and share with Christ in a foretaste of the heavenly banquet
 - d. in 1526, Bucer, Luther, et. al. reached the *Wittenberg Concord* which allowed for the “subtleties” between Luther’s and Bucer’s views – it would be codified again in 1549 in the *Zürich Consensus*
 1. however, a number of prominent Lutherans expressed difficulty with Calvin’s views; some Calvinists accused Lutherans of being “practical” Catholics in the sacrament
 - e. **LOW:** by the mid-16th C., the distinction between being *Lutheran* vs. being *Reformed* was drawn *on this issue*, not the later issue of predestination (they actually agreed on this doctrine)
 2. as Calvinistic churches arose throughout Europe, Calvinism was joined with a zeal for reforming society that did not exist in Lutheran thinking
 - a. **i.e.** Calvinists were convinced that it was their *duty* to make the civil government conform to the law of God – that *transformation of society* (starting with the individual believer) was essential to a proper view of God’s revelation of redemption (redemption of souls *and* the world)
 - b. **remember:** in Geneva, Calvin had insisted that the principles of reformation demanded that an unrepentant sinner needed to be excommunicated from the church
 1. if a man was truly justified *by faith*, but his life did not reflect that faith in *continuing sin*, then it stood as reasonable that such a man should not be considered a part of the church
 2. so, he presented an ecclesiastical ordinance that would subject the citizens of the city to a degree of moral control – being a Christian demanded teaching and conformity to it
 - c. thus, this *reforming zeal* over society was a *direct* outgrowth of Calvin’s view of the relationship between the church and the state ...
- c. the Michael Servetus event in Geneva (1553)**
1. Servetus was a Spanish physician – he had made a number of significant contributions to medical science through his physiological studies – *brilliant, but unbalanced*
 2. Servetus was also a writer of several theological treatises (**e.g.** *The Restoration of Christianity*)
 - a. he argued that the union of church and state after Constantine was a great *apostasy*, and that the Council of Nicea, *in promulgating the doctrine of the Trinity*, had greatly offended God
 - b. Servetus had spent some time in Strasbourg, where the above pamphlet was written – Bucer publicly refuted it and asked Servetus to leave
 - c. Calvin and Servetus became acquainted in 1546, and they exchanged a number of letters debating doctrine (using pseudonyms)
 - d. eventually, Calvin lost patience and refused to respond to further letters (over 30!) – Servetus had even sent to Calvin a copy of the *Institutes* heavily annotated with arguments of error
 - e. so, when Calvin learned that Servetus was intended to travel to Geneva, Calvin wrote a letter to William Farel, warning him to prevent it, noting that he “would not let him leave alive”

3. Servetus was arrested in France, and denied writing the letters to Calvin that were going to be used to convict him of heresy (or even of being Servetus) – he escaped before being tried for heresy
4. on his way to Italy, Servetus passed through Geneva and was recognized – he was arrested, and Calvin (as the ecclesiastical representative of the city) prepared a list of 38 accusations against him
 - a. those opposed to Calvin in the city (the libertines) dragged the trial out, but the *obvious* nature of his heresies was confirmed by other Swiss cities, and the council was *forced* to condemn him
 - b. **rumor**: Calvin appealed to the council to behead him quickly (as an act of mercy), but the council rejected the request, arguing that burning was the only *legal* recourse for the accusations
5. on October 27, 1553, Servetus was burned alive at the edge of the city of Geneva

III. The Importance of Calvin

Content

a. his role in *governmental* reformation

1. the Servetus event is often used by anti-Calvinists to argue that *Calvin himself* was responsible for Servetus' death, that Calvin had him killed because he *disagreed* with Calvin (**i.e.** that Calvin was "offended"), and that it shows that Calvin's *theology* cannot be accepted because he "murdered" Servetus over *nothing* – which is *contraindicated* by Calvin's own *protection* of Servetus *earlier*
2. **but**: the concept of "freedom of religion" (that Servetus should have been allowed to *disagree* with Trinitarian theology) was not yet in place *governmentally* – the intertwining of the church and the state implied that heresy *was a civil matter* (at this point in time)
3. so ... to impute guilt to Calvin for Servetus' death *is to take the man out of his time* ... Calvin was living in a world where the concept of "religious freedom" (civilly) *was not yet in place*
4. however ... it is the *theology* of Calvin that eventually *leads to the idea* of religious freedom – Calvin's insistence that civil magistrates are appointed *under God* to uphold the *law* of God (**i.e.** God's view of right and wrong, not men's) leads (eventually) to the development of *pluralistic* governments where the state allows the church to practice its beliefs *without interference* in theological or ecclesiastical matters, but only in areas of civil disobedience under a Christian worldview (**e.g.** the Constitution of the United States)

b. his role in *theological* reformation

1. there is no doubt that Calvin's thinking, *systematically*, was of great effect in both Europe and the America's after the mid-16th C.
 - a. the reformation in England was based on Calvinistic principles (**see next**), and much of the church in America was founded on Calvinistic theology (**e.g.** including the SBC in 1845)
2. but ... Calvinism is considered highly controversial *for one single reason*: Calvin elevated God's sovereignty over the sovereignty of man, particularly in the area of free will and predestination
 - a. **i.e.** it is the *constant temptation* of the human heart to think of itself "more highly than it ought"
 - b. **i.e.** it is the *constant temptation* of the human heart to think that *the man* is the "final arbiter" of its own destiny – predestination (or any sovereign decree of God) is *offensive* because it rests the destiny of man in God, leaving us with "no control" over such matters
 - c. **IOW**: Calvin simply "returned" the theological thinking of the church to a *Pauline* understanding of the centrality of God *in all things* – rather than *sola ecclesia*, Calvin insisted on *soli Deo gloria*