

Who was John Calvin? 2: Geneva

In Geneva Calvin helped to revise the city's laws, but chiefly focused on reforming the church government and liturgy. In 1559 he even persuaded the authorities to establish a university to train young men to serve the community. Calvin established a universal system of education for the young and helped to arrange care for the poor and the old. In everything he did he sought to bring a godly influence to the people. His methods, which included some strict discipline in the spirit of the age, changed Genevan morals and made it a centre of European power. All this made enemies of some and Calvin faced continual hostility; on occasion his enemies fomented civil disturbances.

Those foolish preachers who rant that Calvin led a police state should repent of lying. Calvin was never a civil governor (magistrate) and was not even a citizen of Geneva until asked to become one in 1559. Calvin's influence was achieved by the strength of his moral integrity, wisdom and preaching of the truth. As was common in those days, the government of the church had larger powers over civil moral duties and local laws enforced these, however Calvin's effect was more humane than the previous conditions. Being strategically situated, Geneva became a haven for Protestant refugees from all lands. Men came there to learn and returned home as missionaries and preachers. It was at Geneva that John Knox was prepared to bring Reformation to Scotland. Thus Calvin's influence spread far and wide. From being a hotbed of sin, Geneva became a model of ethics, 'the garden of the Lord where blood red roses grew' [JR Fleming].

Calvin worked tirelessly in preaching every day on alternate weeks, counselling, advising magistrates, writing letters and writing Biblical works. He wrote commentaries on 23 OT books and all the NT except Revelation and wrote many theological tracts. His greatest work, however, is his 'Institutes of the Christian Religion', revised five times from the 1536 handbook edition, his French translation of which even influenced the development of the French language. By 1559 it became a work of four books and 79 chapters. It caused an explosion in Europe and was one of the most important works in the modern world, dramatically changing politics, ethics, church government and Christian living; indeed the Protestant work ethic (glorifying God in ordinary hard work done with integrity) still affects the western world. All Calvin's works are still well worth studying and are even much easier to read than some later Reformed tomes.

Idelette died in 1549 leaving Calvin very sad. Refusing to remarry, his tireless work (he never rested for more than 15 minutes) resulted in many ailments and great pain. But he continued to work even when confined to bed and dying, which occurred in 1564 aged nearly 55.

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